

MAYFLOWER SCIENCE FANTASY

# MICHAEL MOORCOCK

## THE STEEL TSAR

THIRD VOLUME IN THE OSWALD BASTABLE TRILOGY



# ***The Steel Tsar***

**Oswald Bastable Trilogy  
Book III**

***Michael Moorcock***

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## Introduction

The discovery and subsequent publication of two manuscripts left in the possession of my grandfather has led to a considerable amount of speculation as to their authenticity and authorship. The manuscripts consisted of one made in my grandfather's hand and taken down from the mysterious

Captain Bastable whom he met on Rowe Island in the early years of this century, and another, apparently written by Bastable himself, which was left with my grandfather when he visited China searching for the man who had become, he was told, 'a nomad of the time-streams'.

These very slightly edited texts were published by me as THE WARLORD OF THE AIR and THE LAND LEVIATHAN and I was certain that it was the last I should ever know of Bastable's adventures. When I remarked in a concluding note to THE LAND LEVIATHAN that I hoped Una Persson would some day pay me a visit I was being ironic. I did not believe that I should ever meet the famous chrononaut. As luck would have it, I began to receive visits from her very shortly after I had prepared THE LAND LEVIATHAN. She seemed glad to have me to talk to and gave me permission to use much of what she told me about her experiences in our own and others' time-streams. On the matter of Oswald Bastable, however, she was incommunicative and I learned very quickly not to pump her. Most of my references to him in other books (for instance THE DANCERS AT THE END OF TIME) were highly speculative.

In the late spring of 1979, shortly after I had finished a novel and was resting from the consequent exhaustion, which had left my private life in ruins and my judgment considerably weakened, I had a visit from Mrs. Persson at my

flat in London. I was in no mood to see another human being, but she had heard from somewhere (or perhaps had already seen from the future) that I was in distress and had come to ask if there was anything she could do for me. I said that there was nothing. Time and rest would deal with my problems.

She acknowledged this and, with a small smile, added: 'But eventually you will need to work.'

I suppose I said something self-pitying about never being able to work again (I share that in common with almost every creative person I know) and she did not attempt to dissuade me from the notion.

'However,' she said, 'if you do ever happen to feel the urge, I'll be in touch.'

Curiosity caught me. 'What are you talking about?'

'I have a story for you,' she said.

'I have plenty of stories,' I told her, 'but no will to do anything with them. Is it about Jherek Carnelian or the Duke of Queens?'

She shook her head. 'Not this time.'

'Everything seems pointless,' I said.

She patted me on the arm. 'You should go away for a bit. Travel.'

'Perhaps.'

'And when you come back to London, I'll have the story waiting,' she promised.

I was touched by her kindness and her wish to be of use and I thanked her. As it happened a friend fell ill in Los Angeles and I decided to visit him. I stayed far longer in the United States than I had originally planned and eventually, after a short stay in Paris, settled in England for a while in the spring of 1980.

As Una Persson had predicted, I was, of course, ready to work. And, as she had promised, she turned up one evening, dressed in her usual slightly old-fashioned clothes of a military cut. We enjoyed a drink and some general talk and I

heard gossip from the End of Time, a period that has always fascinated me. Mrs. Persson is a seasoned time-traveler and usually knows what and what not to tell, for incautious words can have an enormous effect either on the time-streams themselves or on that rarity, like herself, the chrononaut who can travel through them more or less at will.

She has always told me that so long as people regard my stories as fiction and as long as they are fashioned to be read as fiction then neither of us should be victims of the Morphail Effect, which is Time's sometimes-radical method of readjusting itself. The Morphail Effect is manifested most evidently in the fact that, for most time-travelers, only 'forward' movement through time (i.e. into their own future) is possible. 'Backward' movement (a return to their present or past) or movement between the various alternative planes is impossible for anyone save those few who make up the famous Guild of Temporal Adventurers. I knew that Bastable had become a member of this Guild, but did not know how he had been recruited, unless it had been in the Valley of the Dawn by Mrs. Persson herself.

'I have brought you something,' she said. She settled herself in her armchair and reached down for a black document case. 'They are not complete, but they are the best I can do. The rest you will have to fill in from what I tell you and from your own perfectly good imagination.' It was a bundle of manuscript. I recognized the hand at once. It was Bastable's.

'Good God!' I was astonished. 'He's turning into a novelist!'

'Not exactly. These are fresh memoirs that are all. He's read the others and is perfectly satisfied with what you've done with them. He was extremely fond of your grandfather and says that he would be quite glad to continue the tradition with you. Particularly, he says, since you've had rather better success in getting his stories published!' She laughed.

The manuscript was a sizable one. I weighed it in my hand. 'So he was never able to find his own period again? Or return to the life he so desperately wanted?'

'That's not for me to say. You'll notice from the manuscript that there's little explanation as to how he came to the particular alternative time-stream he describes. Suffice to say he returned to Teku Benga, crossed into yet another continuum and found his way to the airship-yards at Benares. This time he was reconciled to what had happened and, being an experienced airshipman, claimed slight

Amnesia and a loss of papers. Eventually he got himself a mate's certificate, though it was impossible for him, without impeccable credentials, to find a berth with any of the major lines.'

I smiled. 'And he's still haunted by angst, I suppose?'

'To a degree, He has many lives on his conscience. He knows only worlds at war. But we of the Guild understand what a responsibility we carry and I think membership has helped him.'

'And I'll never meet him?'

'It's unlikely. This stream would probably reject him, turn him into that poor creature your grandfather described, flung this way and that through Time, with no control whatsoever over his destiny.'

'He has that in common with most of us,' I remarked.

She was amused. 'I see you're still not completely over your self-pity, Moorcock.'

I smiled and apologized. 'I'm very excited by this.' I held up the manuscript. 'Bastable presumably wants it published as soon as possible. Why?'

'Perhaps it's mere vanity. You know how people become once they see their names in print.'

'Poor?'

We both laughed at this.

'He trusts you, too,' she continued. 'He knows that you did not tamper with his work and also that he has been of some

use to you in your researches.'

'As have you, Mrs. Persson.'

'I'm glad. We enjoy what you do.'

'You find my speculations funny?' I said.

'That, too. We leave it to your rather strange imagination to produce the necessary obfuscations!'

I looked at the manuscript. I was surprised to notice a few peculiar correspondences and coincidences when compared with my grandfather's first manuscript. Yet Bastable appeared not to make some of the connections the reader might make. I remarked on it to Mrs. Persson.

'Our minds can hold only so much,' she said. 'As I've mentioned before, sometimes we do suffer from genuine amnesia, or at least a kind of blocking out of much of our memory. It is one of the ways in which we are sometimes able to enter time-streams not open to the general run of chrononauts.'

'Time makes you forget?' I said ironically.

'Exactly.'

'As someone who affects anarchism,' I said. 'I'm curious about the references here to Kerensky's Russia. Could it be that—?'

She stopped me. 'I can't tell you any more until you have read the manuscript.'

'A world in which the Bolshevik Revolution did not take place. He hints at it in the other story . . . ' I had often wondered what the Russian Empire would have been like in such circumstances, for one of my other abiding interests is in the Soviet Union and its literature, which was so badly stifled under Stalin.

'You must read what Bastable has written, then ask me some questions. I'll answer where I can. It is up to you, he says, how much "shape" you give it, as a professional writer. But he trusts you to preserve the basic spirit of the memoir.'

'I shall do my best.'



And here, for better or worse, is Oswald Bastable's third memoir. I have done as little work on it as possible and present it to the reader pretty much as I received it. As to its authenticity, that is for you to judge.

*Michael Moorcock,*  
Three Chimneys,  
Yorkshire, England.  
June 1980

# **Part One**

**An English Airshipman's Adventures  
In The Great War Of 1941**

# 1.

## ***The Manner of My Dying***

It was, I think, my fifth day at sea when the revelation came. Just as at some stage of his existence a man can reach a particular decision about how to lead his life, so can he come to a similar decision about how to encounter death. He can face the grim simple truth of his dying, or he can prefer to lose himself in some pleasant fantasy, some dream of heaven or of salvation, and so face his end almost with pleasure.

On my sixth day at sea it was obvious that I was to die and it was then that I chose to accept the illusion rather than the reality.

I had lain all morning at the bottom of the dugout. My face was pressed against wet, steaming wood. The tropical sun throbbed down on the back of my unprotected head and blistered my withered flesh. The slow drumming of my heart filled my ears and counter pointed the occasional slap of a wave against the side of the boat.

All I could think was that I had been spared one kind of death in order to die alone out here on the ocean. And I was grateful for that. It was much better than the death I had left behind.

Then I heard the cry of the seabird and I smiled a little to myself. I knew that the illusion was beginning. There was no possibility that I was in sight of land and therefore I could not really have heard a bird. I had had many similar auditory hallucinations in recent days.

I began to sink into what I knew must be my final coma. But the cry grew more insistent. I rolled over and blinked in the white glare of the sun. I felt the boat rock crazily with the movement of my thin body. Painfully I raised my head

and peered through a shifting haze of silver and blue and saw my latest vision. It was a very fine one: more prosaic than some, but more detailed, too.

I had conjured up an island. An island rising at least a thousand feet out of the water and about ten miles long and four miles wide: a monstrous pile of volcanic basalt, limestone and coral, with deep green patches of foliage on its flanks.

I sank back into the dugout, squeezing my eyes shut and congratulating myself on the power of my own imagination. The hallucinations improved as any hopes of surviving vanished. I knew it was time to give myself up to madness, to pretend that the island was real and so die a pathetic rather than a dignified death.

I chuckled. The sound was a dry, death rattle.

Again the seabird screamed.

Why rot slowly and painfully for perhaps another thirty hours when I could die now in a comforting dream of having been saved at the last moment?

With the remains of my strength I crawled to the stern and grasped the starting cord of the outboard. Weakly I jerked at it. Nothing happened. Doggedly, I tried again. And again. And all the while I kept my eyes on the island, waiting to see if it would shimmer and disappear before I could make use of it.

I had seen so many visions in the past few days. I had seen milk-white angels with crystal cups of pure water drifting just out of my reach. I had seen blood-red devils with fiery pitchforks piercing my skin.

I had seen enemy airships, which popped like bubbles just as they were about to release their bombs on me. I had seen orange-sailed schooners as tall as the EmpireStateBuilding. I had seen schools of tiny black whales. I had seen rose-colored coral atolls on which lounged beautiful young women whose faces turned into the faces of Japanese soldiers as I came closer and who then slid beneath the

waves where I was sure they were trying to capsize my boat. But this mirage retained its clarity no matter how hard I stared and it was so much more detailed than the others.

The engine fired after the tenth attempt to start it. There was hardly any fuel left. The screw squealed, rasped and began to turn. The water foamed. The boat moved reluctantly across a flat sea of burnished steel, beneath a swollen and throbbing disc of fire, which was the sun, my enemy.

I straightened up, squatting like a desiccated old toad on the floor of the boat, whimpering as I gripped the tiller, for its touch sent shards of fire through my hand and into my body.

Still the hallucination did not waver; it even appeared to grow larger as I approached it. I completely forgot my pain as I allowed myself to be deceived by this splendid mirage.

I steered under brooding gray cliffs, which fell sheer into the sea. I came to the lower slopes of the island and saw palms, their trunks bowed as if in prayer, swaying over sharp rocks washed by white surf. There was even a brown crab scuttling across a rock; there was weed and lichen of several varieties; seabirds diving in the shallows and darting upwards with shining fish in their long beaks. Perhaps the island was real, after all . . .?

But then I had rounded a coral outcrop and at once discovered the final confirmation of my complete madness. For here was a high concrete wall: a harbor wall encrusted above the water line with barnacles and coral and tiny plants. It had been built to follow the natural curve of a small bay. And over the top of the wall I saw the roofs and upper stories of houses, which might have belonged to a town on any part of the English coast. And as a superb last touch there was a flagpole at which flew a torn and weather-stained Union Jack! My fantasy was complete. I had created an English fishing port in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

I smiled again. The movement caused the blistered skin of my lips to crack still more. I ignored the discomfort. Now all I had to do was enter the harbor, step off onto what I believed to be dry land - and drown. It was a fine way to die. I gave another hoarse, mad chuckle, full of self-admiration, and I abandoned myself to the world of my mind.

Guiding my boat round the wall I found the harbor mouth. It was partly blocked by the wreck of a steamer. Rust-red funnels and masts rose above the surface. The water was unclouded and as I passed I could see the rest of the sunken ship leaning on the pink coral with multicolored fish swimming in and out of its hatches and portholes. The name was still visible on her side: *Jeddah*, Manila.

Now I saw the little town quite clearly.

The buildings were in that rather spare Victorian or Edwardian neoclassical style and had a distinctly run-down look about them. They seemed deserted and some were obviously boarded up. Could I not perhaps create a few inhabitants before I died? Even a laskar or two would be better than nothing, for I now realized that I had built a typical Outpost of Empire. These were colonial buildings, not English ones, and there were square, largely undecorated native buildings mixed in with them.

On the quay stood various sheds and offices. The largest of these bore the faded slogan *Welland Rock Phosphate Company*. A nice touch of mine. Behind the town stood something resembling a small and pitted version of the Eiffel Tower. A battered airship mooring mast! Even better!

Out from the middle of the quay stretched a stone mole. It had been built for engine-driven cargo ships, but there were only a few rather seedy looking native fishing dhows moored there now. They looked hardly seaworthy. I headed towards the mole, croaking out the words of the song I had not sung for the past two days.

'Rule Britannia, Britannia rules the waves! Britons never, never shall be - marr-I-ed to a mer-MI-ad at the bottom of the

deep, blue sea!'

As if invoked by my chant Malays and Chinese materialized on the quayside. Some of them began to run along the jetty, their brown and yellow bodies gleaming in the sunshine, their thin arms gesticulating. They wore loincloths or sarongs of various colors and wide coolie hats of woven palm-leaves shaded their faces. I even heard their voices babbling in excitement as they approached.

I laughed as the boat bumped against the weed-grown jetty. I tried to stand up to address these wonderful creatures of my imagination. I felt godlike, I suppose. And to talk to them was the least, after all, that I could do. I opened my mouth. I spread my arms.

'My friends—'

And my starved body collapsed under me. I fell backwards into the dugout, striking my shoulder on the empty petrol can, which had contained my water.

There came a few words shouted in Pidgin English and a brown figure in patched white shorts jumped into the canoe, which rocked violently, jolting the last tatters of sense from my skull.

White teeth grinned. 'You okay now, sar.'

'I can't be,' I said.

'Jolly good, sar.'

Red darkness came.

I had set off to sail over a thousand miles to Australia in an open boat. I had barely managed to make two hundred, and most of that in the wrong direction.

The date was May 3rd, 1941. I had been at sea for about a hundred and fifty hours. It was three months since the Destruction of Singapore by the Third Fleet of the Imperial Japanese Aerial Navy.

## 2. ***The Destruction of Singapore***

It had been a Utopia of sorts, which the Japanese destroyed.

Designed as a model for other great settlements which would in the future spring up throughout the East, Singapore's white graceful skyscrapers, her systems of shining monorails, her complex of smoothly-run airparks, had been lovingly laid out as an example to our Empire's duskier citizens of the benefits which British rule would eventually bring them.

And Singapore was burning. I am probably the last European to have witnessed her destruction.

After serving on the Portuguese aerial freighter, *Palmerin*, for a couple of months, I took several berths for single voyages, usually filling in for sick men, or men on leave, until I found myself in Rangoon without any chance of a job. I ran out of money in Rangoon and was willing to begin any kind of employment, even considered enlisting as a private in the army, when I was told by one of my bar acquaintances of a mate's position which had become vacant the night before.

'Chap was killed in a fight in Shari's house,' he said, nodding down the street. 'The skipper started the fight. He's not offering good money, but it could get you somewhere better than Rangoon, eh?'

'Indeed.'

'He's just over there? Want to meet him?'

I agreed. And that was how I came, eventually, to Singapore, though not in the ship on which I had signed.

A greasy Greek merchantman, the *Andreas Papadakis*, from some disgusting Cypriot port, trading in any marginally



lucrative cargo which more fastidious captains would reject, had originally been bound for Bangkok when her engines had given out during an electrical storm which also affected our wireless telephone. We had drifted for two days, trying to make repairs aloft and losing two of our

Crew in the process, by the time the old windbag began to sag badly in the middle and drift towards the ground.

The *Papadakis* was not much suited to rough weather of any kind and could not be relied upon in even a minor crisis. The gondola cables and our steering cables both were badly in need of repair and we should have waited our moment and come down over water if we hoped for any chance of landing without serious damage, but by now the captain was drunk on retsina and refused to listen to my advice, while the rest of the crew, a mixed bunch of cut-throats from most parts of the Adriatic, were in a panic. I did my best to persuade the captain to let go our remaining gas, but he told me he knew best. The result was that we had begun to drop rapidly as we neared the coast of the Malay Peninsula, the *Andreas Papadakis* groaning and complaining the whole time and threatening to come apart at the seams.

She shivered and trembled in every section as the captain stared blearily through the forward ports and began, it seemed to me, to argue in Greek with the powers of Fate, on whom he blamed the entire disaster. It was as if he thought he could talk or soothe his way out of the inevitable fact. I kept my hands on the wheel, praying to sight a lake or at least a river, but we were heading over dense jungle. I remember a mass of waving green branches, an appalling screech of metal and wood as they met, a blow to my ribs, which knocked me backwards into the arms of the captain who must have died muttering some wretched Cypriot remonstrance.

He saved my life, as it happened, by cushioning my own fall and breaking his back. I came to once or twice while I was being pulled from the wreckage, but only really

regained my senses when I woke up in St Mary's Hospital, Changi, Singapore. I had a few broken bones, which were mending, some minor internal injuries, which had been tended to, and I would soon be recovered, thanks to the Airshipmen's Distress Fund, which had paid for my medical, treatment and the period during which I would recuperate.

I had been lucky. There were only two other survivors. Five more had died in one of the native hospitals to which they had been taken.

While I rested, somewhat relieved not to be worrying about work and glad to be in Singapore, where there was every chance of finding decent employment, I began to read about the tensions growing between several of the Great Powers. Japan was disputing territory with Russia. The Russians, even though they were now a republic, had almost as much imperial determination as the Japs. However, we knew nothing of the War until the night of February 22nd, 1941: the night of the attack by Japan's Third Fleet: the night when a British dream of Utopia was destroyed perhaps forever.

We were trying to escape what was left of the colony. An ambulance ship was moored to an improvised mast and the vessel all but filled the blackened, ruined grounds of St Mary's: a huge airship silhouetted against a sky which was ruby red with the flames of a thousand fires. The scene was surreal. I think of it today as the flight from Sodom and Gomorrah, but in Noah's Ark! Tiny figures of patients and staff rushed, panic-stricken, into the vessel's swollen belly while everywhere overhead moved monstrous, implacable Japanese flying ironclads. They had come suddenly, mindless beasts of the upper regions, to seed Singapore with their incendiary spawn.

Our resistance had been impotent. Far away a few searchlight beams wandered about the sky, sometimes showing a dense cloud of smoke from which could be glimpsed a section of one of the vast aerial men-o'-war. Then

the three remaining anti-aircraft guns would boom and send up shells, which either missed or exploded harmlessly against the side of the attacking craft. There were several of our monoplanes still buzzing through the blackness at speeds of over four hundred miles an hour, firing uselessly into hulls stronger than steel. They were picked off by tracer bullets shrieking from armored gun-gondolas. I saw a hover gyro whirl like a frightened humming bird out of the flames, and then it, too, was struck by magnesium bullets and went spinning into the flaming chaos below.

Our ship was not the latest type. Few hospital ships ever were. The cigar-shaped hull protecting the gasbags was of strong boron-fiberglass, but the two-tiered gondola below was more vulnerable. This gondola contained crew and passenger accommodation, engines, fuel and ballast tanks, and into it we were packing as many human beings as we could. I, of course, almost fully recovered, was helping the doctors and medical staff.

Without much hope of the ship's being able to get away, I helped carry stretchers up one of the two folding staircases lowered from the bowels of the ship. This in itself was a hard enough task, for the vessel was insecurely anchored and it swayed and strained at the dozen or so steel cables holding it to the ground.

The last terrified patient was packed in and the last nurses, carrying bundles of blankets and medical supplies, hurried aboard while airmen unpegged the gangways so they could be folded back into the ship. The stairs began to bounce like a cakewalk at a fair as, with the riggers, I managed to climb into the ship, losing my footing several times, shaken so much I felt my body would fall to pieces.

Suddenly several incendiary bombs struck the hospital at once. The darkness exploded with shouting flame. More bombs burst in the grounds, but incredibly none hit the airship direct. For a moment I was blinded by brilliant silver light and a wave of intense heat struck my face and hands.

From somewhere above I heard the captain shout 'Let slip!' even before the gangway was fully raised.

I clutched and found a handrail, dropped the box I had been carrying and desperately tried to grope my way up the few final rungs before I should be crushed by the automatically closing steps. My vision returned quickly and I saw the cables lashing as if in fury at having to release their grip on the ship.

And then I stood on the embarkation platform itself and my immediate danger was past.

### **3.** ***The Crash***

Not much later I sighted the large conglomeration of tightly crowded together buildings, which was the port of Surabaya. A busy city of mixed European and Malayan architecture, it was one of the few big ports to survive the decline of conventional shipping in favor of the air-going cargo vessels. Its harbor was still crammed with steamers and the whole place looked unnaturally peaceful in the early morning light. I felt an irrational surge of jealousy, a desire that Surabaya too might one-day experience what Singapore had experienced. What right had this dirty, ugly port to survive when a mighty monument to a humane and idealistic Empire had perished in flames?

I pushed these dreadful ideas from my head. In a few more moments we should be crashing into the sea. Without power of any kind, the ship was going to have great difficulty in landing short of the harbor itself.

The whole vessel suddenly shuddered and I called for the staff to stand by as some patients began to moan questions or whimper in fear. The ship turned and began to drift in a clumsy, barely controlled maneuver and I lost sight of the town altogether. I saw only a stream launch surging over the waves and turning to follow us, leaving a white scar in the sea. There came a peculiar creaking and groaning from overhead as if some unusual strain had been placed on the gasbags and the hull containing them.

We began to drop.

A wailing went up from the patients then and we did our best to reassure them that everything was in order and that soon they would be in safe hospital beds in Surabaya.

I saw the sea shoot up to meet us, and then retreat again. We began to move in a series of shuddering leaps as if riding a gigantic switchback. Somewhere a whole collection of crockery smashed to the deck and it was all I could do to hold myself upright by the safety rail.

And then, to my horror, I saw the roofs of the city below. Our gondola was almost scraping the highest of the buildings as we sped over them. We had missed the sea altogether and were traveling rapidly inland! The captain had left his decision until it was too late.

I heard the intercom buzz and then came the first officer's strained tones. A sudden strong following wind had blown up just as we were about to descend and this had completely thrown out everyone's calculations. The captain intended to try to take the ship right across the island and land in the sea near Djogjakarta, which was the nearest town we were likely to reach, considering the present direction of the wind. However, a lot of gas had already been valved out and we might not be able to gain enough height. In that event we must be prepared for a crash-landing on the ground.

I well knew what that would mean. The ship was considerably overburdened. If she fell from the sky to the land there was every chance we should all be killed.

A patient, wakened from sedation by the first officer's voice, screamed in alarm. A nurse hurried to soothe him.

The ship shivered and her nose came up sharply so that the deck tilted at a steep angle. Then the nose dipped and a few objects not secured began to slide down towards the bow. I jammed my foot against the rail. Through the ports I saw a Dutch flying boat follow us as if trying to make out the reason for our change of plan. Then, perhaps despairing of us, it turned back towards the sea.

Surabaya was behind us. Below us now lay a wide expanse of neat rice paddies, rows of tamarind trees and fields of tall sugar cane. We were so low that I could make

out the heads of peasants looking up at us as our shadow moved across their fields. Then I was thrown against the rail as a fresh gust of wind caught the ship and slewed round again, revealing the kapok plantations on the slopes of Java's grim volcanic hillsides.

I thought we were bound to crash into the hills, for they were rising steeply and were beginning to turn into the gray flanks of mountains. From some of these drifted wisps of yellowish white smoke. Instinctively I braced myself, but we just managed to cross the first line of mountains. And ahead I could see denser clouds of pale gray smoke, coiling and boiling like a tangle of lazy serpents.

The ship jerked her nose up again and we ascended a few feet. The damaged tail planes caused us to make a crazy zigzag over the landscape and I could see our elongated shadow moving erratically below. Then our motion steadied, but it seemed inevitable to me that we must soon crash into one of the many semi-active volcanoes, which dominated Java's interior.

I was unprepared for the next lurch and I lost my grip on the rail as we started to go up rapidly. Clambering to my feet I saw that the ship had released her water ballast. It sprayed like a sudden rainstorm over the dusty slopes of the mountains. Perhaps, after all, we would make the sea on the other side.

But a few moments later the captain's voice came through the loudspeakers. It was calm enough under the circumstances. It told us that we were going to have to lighten the ship as much as possible. We were to make ready all non-essential materials and the crew would collect them from us in a couple of minutes.

Frantically we stumbled about the ward gathering up everything, which could be thrown overboard. Eventually we had handed to the airshipmen a great pile of books, food, medical supplies, clothing, bedding, oxygen cylinders and more. All went overboard.

And the ship rose barely enough to clear the next range of mountains.

I wondered if the captain would ask for volunteers to jump from the ship next. We were by this time flying over a bleak and barren wasteland of cold lava ridges, with not so much as a clump of palms to break our descent should we crash. The tension in the wards had increased again and those patients not still asleep were talking in high, panicky voices.

Some of the questions were difficult to answer. Among the 'non-essential' materials taken from us had been the bodies of those who had died in transit.

But even this act of desperate callousness had bought us very little time.

The intercom crackled again. The first officer began to speak.

'Please ready yourselves for - Oh, God! '

The next moment I saw the gray mountainside rushing towards us and before we fully realized it, we were engulfed in clouds of white-white smoke and our keel was making a frightful screaming sound as it scraped the sides of the cliff.

The screams of the patients joined the scream of the ship itself. I heard a monstrous creaking noise and then I was flung away from the rail and felt myself sliding towards the bunks.

The vessel bounced and juddered, seemed to gain height for a moment and then came down with a horrifying crack, which sent the bunks crashing loose from their moorings. I had the impression of waving arms and legs, of terrified faces. I heard trays of instruments clattering and saw bodies flying about like rag dolls. A great wail filled my ears and then the ship rolled, went up again and came down for the last time. In a flailing mass of bodies I was flung towards the starboard side. I saw my head rushing towards a fiberglass strut near the observation ports. I tried to put out my hands to stop the impact, but the bodies and objects on top of me trapped them. There came the final crash of impact and I



remember being filled with an almost cheerful sense of relief that I had been killed and the ordeal was over at last.

## 4. ***Prisoners***

I think I must have awakened briefly once and heard peculiar squeaky voices babbling from somewhere far away and I realized that the hydrogen was escaping and thus causing the speakers to talk in high-pitched tones. Deciding that I was alive and sure to be rescued, I fell back into unconsciousness.

When I next awoke I tried to move but could not. I thought that perhaps my back was broken, for there was little sensation save for the impression that something heavy was pressing down on me.

Because of this pressure I found it very difficult to breathe in deeply enough to shout for the help that I was sure must be near, for I could hear people moving about quite close by.

The voices were no longer squeaky but they were not familiar either. I listened carefully. The voices were shouting some variant of Malay difficult for me to understand. I thought at first that the local peasantry, the sulphur gatherers who work the volcanoes, had come to rescue us. I could smell the acrid smoke and it made breathing even harder. My next attempt to cry out failed. Then I heard more shouts.

And the shouts were followed by sharp reports, which I did recognize. Gun shots.

With a feeling of terrible impotence I tried to move my head to see what was happening.

The shouting stopped. There was stillness. Then a thin, hysterical scream. Another shot. Silence. A Malay voice giving rapid, savage commands.

Painfully, at last, I managed to turn my head and peer out of a jumble of twisted struts and wreckage. I saw bodies

impaled on jagged shards of fiberglass and beyond them a pall of smoke through which dim figures moved. As the smoke cleared I saw bright flashes of green, red and yellow

Silk. These Malays were not sulphur-gatherers that were certain.

Then I saw them clearly. They were clad in the familiar style of Malay bandits and pirates from Koto Raja to Timor. They wore richly colored sarongs and embroidered jackets. On their heads were pitjis, turbans or wide coolie hats. There were sandals of painted leather on their brown feet and their bodies were crossed with bandoliers of cartridges. At their belts hung bolstered revolvers, knives and parangs and they had rifles in their hands. I saw one come towards me, a look of cruel hatred frozen on his features. I dropped my head and shut my eyes, hearing him poke about in the wreckage above me. I heard a shot close to my face and thought he had fired at me, but the bullet landed in a corpse lying on top of me. He moved away.

I looked up again.

The bandits were herding the survivors down the mountain. Through the smoke I could see nurses in smudged, torn white uniforms, doctors still dressed in medical overalls or in shirtsleeves, airshipmen in sky blue, staggering ahead of their captors. But there were no patients among them. I watched in dazed despair until the smoke swallowed them up.

Then slowly, as it dawned on me what had happened to my companions, pain began to flood through my body. I strained to twist myself round and see what pinned me in the wreckage.

One of the relatively light bunks had fallen on top of me and in the bunk was the body of a child. Its dead face, the eyes wide open, stared into mine. I shuddered and tried to lift the bunk clear. It moved slightly. The child's head rolled. I turned, reached out with bleeding hands and grasped a broken strut in front of me, pulling myself desperately from

under the bunk until I was free and my breathing was easier. But my legs were still numb and I could not stand. I leaned forward and got a hold on another strut, using that to pull my body a few more inches over the wreckage, then I think I fainted for a few minutes.

It took me a long time to pull myself over the struts and the broken slabs of hull, and the corpses until I lay on the outer areas of the wreckage on hard stone.

For all I was bruised and bleeding, I had no bones broken. The bodies of those who had died had saved me from the worst of the impact. Gradually the feeling came back to my legs and I was able to stand, gritting my teeth against the pain. I looked around me.

I was standing by the main wreckage of the ship on a mountain coated with streamers of yellow sulphur dust. Everywhere were bodies - crumpled, broken bodies of men, women and children, of patients in nightgowns and pajamas, of wounded soldiers in tattered uniforms, of airship officers and crewmen, of nurses, orderlies and doctors. Nearly two thousand bodies and not one of them stirred as the wind moved the slow smoke over them, and the yellow dust swirled, and shreds of fabric fluttered amongst the crumpled ruins of the giant airship. Without hope I wandered through the piles of dead.

Two thousand human beings who had sought to escape death in the fires of Singapore, only to find it on the barren, windswept rocks of an unknown Javanese hillside. I sighed and sat down, picking up a crushed packet of cigarettes I had seen. I opened the packet and took out one of the flattened cigarettes, lighting it and trying to think. But it was no good, my brain refused to function.

I looked about me. Jagged holes gaped in the airship's hull. Most of the gasbags had been ripped open and the helium lost. The wreckage covered a vast area of the mountainside. There was nowhere I looked which was not

littered with it. And over it all moved thick ribbons of smoke from the volcano.

The smoke stroked the broken bones of the ship, the smashed gondolas, and the ruined engine nacelles, like the phantoms of the dead welcoming others into their ranks.

I got up and put out the cigarette with a stained, scratched boot. I coughed on the fumes and I shivered with reaction and with cold. The slope was probably a thousand feet above sea level. It was not surprising that the overloaded ship had crashed. Numbly I continued my search for survivors but at the end of two hours I had found only corpses. What was still more horrifying was that many had actually survived the crash. As I searched I found little girls and boys who had been shot through the head or had their throats cut, young and old women butchered by parangs, men who had been decapitated. The bandits had been through the survivors systematically killing all those who for one reason or another had been unable or unwilling to walk. As the horror increased I was suddenly seized by nausea and stood with one hand leaning on a rock while I vomited again and again until all that came out of me were dry, retching coughs. Then I walked back to the main wreckage and found a blanket and a plastic container of water. I stripped off my useless lifejacket and wrapped myself in the blanket, stumbling up the mountainside until I was clear of the corpses. Then I slept.

I awoke before dawn and I was shivering. From somewhere below came a chilling howl which at first I mistook for that of a human being. Then I realized that the howl came from a wild dog hunting in the forest at the foot of the mountain. As dawn broke I went back to the wreck.

By now I had worked out roughly what had happened. Plainly the crash had been witnessed by one of the many rebel gangs who normally occupied these heights and, from time to time, would raid the Dutch towns and farmsteads below. Inspired by the support of both the Japanese and

their more sophisticated nationalist countrymen, these rebels had recently grown bolder and had come to offer a serious threat to the colonists. Whether they called themselves bandits, pirates or 'nationalists', all hated the whites in general and the Dutch in particular. They had captured the survivors probably as hostages or possibly to deliver to their Japanese friends in return for more guns or supplies. Possibly they might just want to take pleasure in killing them slowly. I couldn't be sure. But I did know that if they found me I should suffer the same fate and none of the prospects were pleasant.

There had been few weapons aboard the hospital ship and for all I was inclined to arm myself I did not bother to hunt among the dead for a gun. The rebels would probably have found any there were. Instead I rescued another plastic container of water, a box of rather stale sandwiches, discovered a kitbag of medical supplies which I shouldered and then, thoughtfully, for I knew I might sooner or later find myself in thick jungle, tugged a parang from the body of one of the very nurses who had restored me to health at Changi.

I stumbled away from the broken hulk of the aircraft, going down the mountain. My eyes stung and my throat felt clogged with sulphur.

I was still moving as if in a trance - moving, as it were, from one dream and into another. Nothing had seemed completely real since the first ships of the Japanese Air Fleet had been sighted in the skies over Singapore.

Yet for all that I went warily through the drifting smoke. I had no wish to be plunged into the nightmare of capture by the Malay bandits.

At last I emerged into hot sunshine, saw blue, calm sky above me and the rich, variegated greens of a forest below. I looked about for signs of the bandits and their captives but I could see nothing.

Beyond the forest was a faint line in the sky. It was the horizon of the sea. The airship had almost succeeded in

crossing the island and would have done if the wind had not driven it against what I now saw was the highest mountain in the region. I would try for the ship's destination of Djogjakarta and pray that the city was still in Dutch hands. My best bet would be to cross the intervening land to the sea and then follow the beach more or less westward until I got to the town, or, with luck, find a road on which I could get a lift.

There was no point in trying to do anything for the captured survivors myself. Once in Djogjakarta I could tell the authorities what had happened and hope that Dutch hover-gyros would go out with soldiers and save the people.

And so I began my journey to the sea.

It took three days, first through the thick jungle and out on to the plains until I came to the paddy fields which I had to wade through, making wide detours around villages in case the local peasants were, as was often the case, in league with the bandits.

It was an exhausting trip and I was half-starved by the time I saw the beach ahead, not an hour's march away. In some relief I began to wade through the last paddy, my ruined boots dragged at the clinging mud and then I stopped, hearing a familiar sound in the distance.

It was the drone of an airship's engines. I looked up and located the source. A silver flash in the sky.

Tears came into my eyes and my shoulders slumped as I realized my struggle was over. I was delivered. I started to yell and wave, though it was unlikely that the crew could even see me at that height, let alone distinguish me for a shipwrecked Englishman!

But the ship *was* coming down. It did seem to be looking for me. Perhaps a rescue ship from Surabaya? I cursed myself for not staying near the wreck where I might have been seen earlier. Up to my waist in water, surrounded by the neat rows of rice plants, I waved my parang and yelled still louder.

Then I saw the motif on the ship's hull and instantly I had plunged up to my neck among the plants, pulling them over my head.

The ship bore the red disc of the sun blazoned on its flanks. It was a vessel of the Imperial Japanese Air Fleet.

For a few moments the ship circled the area and then flew off towards the mountains. I waited until it had disappeared before daring to emerge from the water. I had become a timid creature in the past twenty-four hours.

More warily than ever I crept to the seashore until at last I lay exhausted in the shadow of the rock on a warm beach of black, volcanic sand against which beat the heavy white surf of the Indian Ocean.

The presence of the scout ship over Java was ominous. It meant that Japan felt strong enough to ignore Dutch neutrality. It could even mean that Japan, or the bandits who served her, had taken the island.

I wondered if there was now any point in my trying to reach Djogjakarta. I knew that the Japanese were not kind to their captives.

The sound of the surf seemed to grow louder and louder and more and more restful until soon the questions ceased to plague me as I stretched out on the soft sand and let my weary brain and body sink into sleep.



## **5.**

### ***The Price of Fishing Boats***

At noon on the next day I saw the fishing village. It was a somewhat ramshackle collection of log and wattle huts of various sizes. All the huts were thatched with palm leaves and some had been raised on stilts. The dugouts, moored to rickety wooden jetties built out into the shallows, were primitive and hardly looked seaworthy. Tall palms whose curving trunks and wide leaves appeared to offer greater shelter than the houses themselves shaded the huts.

I shrank back behind a hillock and deliberated for a few moments. There was a chance that the villagers were in league with either the Japanese or the bandits or both. Yet, for all I was desperate to get to safety, I was tired of hiding, I was dreadfully hungry, and had reached a point where I did not much care who those villagers were, or to whom they felt loyalty -just as long as they fed me something and let me lie down out of the glare of the sun.

I made my decision and plodded forward. I thought I knew the kind of white man these people would be most prepared to tolerate and feed.

I had reached the center of the village before they began to emerge, first the adult men, then the women, and the children. They glowered at me. I smiled back, holding up my pack. 'Medicine,' I said, desperately trying to recall my vocabulary.

They all looked to me as if they could use what I had to offer.

A few villagers emerged from the general crowd. These all carried old guns, parangs and knives, which, in spite of their age, looked pretty serviceable.

'Medicine,' I said again.

There was a stirring from the back of the crowd. I heard words in an unfamiliar dialect. I prayed that some of them spoke Malay and that they would give me a chance to talk to them before they killed me. There was no question that my presence was resented.

An older man pushed his way through the armed villagers. He had bright, cunning eyes, and a calculating frown. He looked at my bag and uttered a couple of words in his dialect. I replied in Malay. This had to be the headman, for he was far better dressed than his fellows in a yellow and red silk sarong. There were sandals on his feet.

'*Belanda?*' he said. 'Dutch?'

I shook my head. '*Inggeris.*' I was not sure if he saw any difference between a Dutchman and an Englishman. But his brow cleared a little. He nodded.

'I have medicine.' Carefully I enunciated the Malay words, for his dialect was not one with which I was familiar. 'I can help your sick.'

'Why do you come like this, without a boat or a car or a flying machine?'

'I was on a ship.' I pointed out to sea. 'It caught fire. I swam here. I wish to go to - to Bali. If you want me to cure your sick, you must pay me.'

A slow smile crossed his lips. This made sense to him. I had come to bargain. Now he looked at me almost in relief.

'We have little money,' he said. 'The Dutch do not pay us for our fish now that the *Orang Djepang* war against them.' He pointed up the coast towards Djogjakarta. 'They fight.'

I disguised my despair. So now there was no point in trying to reach the town. I would have to think of another plan.

'We have rice,' said the headman. 'We have fish. But no money.'

I decided to continue with my original idea. If it worked I would be a little better off. 'I want a boat. I will cure what

sickness I can, but you must give me one of the boats with the engines.'

The headman's eyes narrowed. The boats were their most valuable possessions. He sniffed and he frowned and he pursed his lips. Then he nodded. 'You will stay with us until ten men fall ill and are cured and five women and five male children,' he said, lowering his eyes.

I guessed that he was trying to hide any hint in his eyes that he might be getting the best of the bargain. 'Five men,' I said. 'Ten men.' I spread my hands. 'I agree.'

And that was how I came to spend more weeks than I had planned in a remote and faintly hostile little Javanese fishing village, for the headman, of course, had tricked me.

The men proved disappointingly healthy and the women and children seemed constantly sick of minor complaints so that, with my limited medical knowledge, I treated many more people than had been called for in the original bargain, but I never seemed in sight of making up the male quota. The headman had realized at once that he was on to a good thing and it was soon evident that even when the men did fall sick they did not report to me but stuck to their usual methods of cure. At least two died while I was there. They were prepared to forego any attention from me so that I should continue treating the women and children.

For all that, I was scarcely angry. The routine was an anodyne to my weary brain and I lost myself in it. My awareness of any reality beyond the confines of the village grew steadily more vague. Chaos had come again to the outside world, but the day-to-day life of the village was the model of simple order and I might have lived my life there if the outside world had not, at last, intruded.

Looking back, I understand that it was inevitable, but I was surprised when it happened.

One morning I saw a cloud of dust in the distance. It seemed that the sand of the beach was being disturbed, but I could not distinguish the cause of the disturbance.

Then as the dust cloud came closer I realized what it meant and I ran to hide in the doorway of a hut.

The tires of military cars - big, square utilitarian things with heavy-duty steam turbines driving their massive wheels, threw up the dust. And the military cars were crammed with Japanese soldiers. Almost certainly they had conquered the whole island by now and, as certainly, had heard some rumor of my presence in the village. They were coming to investigate.

It was at this point that I decided to sail for Australia. There was nowhere else to go.

Although I had failed to fulfill my original bargain with the headman, I still had the moral right to do what I did, for I had dealt fairly enough with the villagers. And I would leave what there was of my medical kit behind for them.

Taking only a petrol can full of water, I crept down to the shore, using a jetty as cover. Then I waded to one of the outboards and began to untie it. All the villagers were watching the oncoming cars and it was my only chance to escape. I started to push the boat slowly towards the open sea while the villagers ran about in excitement at the arrival of their new masters.

I was lucky. A current soon caught the dugout and carried it more rapidly away from the shore. At last the villagers saw me, realized what was happening just as the Japanese cars drew up in the village square. I was now some distance out and having trouble trying to climb into the dugout without upsetting it.

The villagers began to gesticulate and point towards me. With a heave I managed to get into the wildly rocking boat and tried to get the battered outboard going.

It fired after only three false starts. I adjusted the tiller and headed for the open sea, noticing with satisfaction that there was two spare cans of fuel stowed amidships.

I heard pistol shots, then rifle shots.

Then a machine gun started up and bullets buzzed about my ears and struck the water all around me. I kept changing course and at one point did a complete circle and headed in the opposite direction to Darwin, my proposed destination, hoping that this would confuse them when they came to radio their headquarters and instruct them to send out airships and patrol boats to look for me.

The gunfire stopped for a moment. I looked back and saw the tiny figures of the villagers. They seemed to be kneeling before the Japanese.

Then the machine gun started up again, but this time it did not fire out to sea.

A few hours later I began to think that the chances of pursuit had disappeared. I had sighted only one airship in the distance and soon it would be night. I had been lucky.

As I chugged out over the smooth and blazing mirror of the ocean, congratulating myself and with my thoughts increasingly turning to abstractions, I did not realize that the Japanese patrols must have been searching waters where I might logically be. It seems that I had already lost my bearings, in more senses than one.

As the burning days and the cold nights passed, I began to realize that I had no chance at all of reaching Australia, and I started to indulge in debates with my starving, thirsty self on the nature of life, the nature of death and the nature of what seemed to me a continuing struggle between Chaos and Order, with the former tending to come off rather better in the long run.

And it was this babbling and foolish wretch - once a practical and pragmatic soldier in a more orderly world - who eventually sighted Rowelsland and decided, reasonably, that it was nothing more than a splendidly detailed illusion.

## 6. ***The Mysterious Dempsey***

Rowelsland was discovered in 1615 by the British explorer Richard Rowe.

In 1887 it was found to contain formations of almost pure calcium and in 1888 the island was annexed by Great Britain. That year the first settlers arrived and by 1897 they had obtained a concession from the mother country to work the phosphate deposits. From being uninhabited before 1888, it had by the first third of this century achieved a population of more than two thousand, mainly Malay and Chinese miners who had come there to work for the Welland Rock Phosphate Company which was the island's sole industrial concern.

Rowelsland lies - or lay - in the Indian Ocean, 224 miles South, 8° East of Java Head and 259 miles North, 79° East of the Keeling Islands. It is 815 miles from the ruins of Singapore and 1,630 miles from what is left of Fremantle, Western Australia. Its European population used to number a hundred or so: the Official Representative and his staff; the manager and administrative staff of the Welland Rock Phosphate Company; various private residents there for their health (Rowe Island was a very healthy place); a young lieutenant commanding the small garrison of Ghoorkas; some restaurant-, shop- and hotel-keepers; various missionaries and the airpark and dock officials. When I arrived most of these, of course, had already gone and neither airships nor steamers came to collect the island's only export.

The settlement had a mosque, a Buddhist temple, a Catholic church, a Methodist chapel and a mission hospital run by the Church of England. The hospital was staffed by a

group of young Pakistani nursing nuns under the direction of a layman, Dr Hira, a Singhalese. The hospital's missionary and his wife had departed for Australia soon after the Destruction of Singapore.

It was in this hospital that I woke up and slowly realized Rowelsland was not, after all, a hallucination.

I was sore and my body stung all over, but I no longer felt thirsty, merely hungry. I lay between the rather rough linen sheets of what was evidently a white hospital bed. The walls were white and there was an ivory crucifix on the wall, a few tropical flowers stuck in a pot on the ledge by the partially opened window. I felt the urge to scratch, but discovered both hands were bandaged. I moved and my joints throbbed. I tried to sit upright, but fell back wearily. It was still hard to believe I was safe, after all. I had survived.

A little while later the door opened and in came a shy, beautiful Pakistani girl in a cream-colored nun's habit. She nodded and smiled gravely at me, standing aside to admit a very tall, very thin Singhalese whose gangling frame was draped in an elegant white suit. Around his neck was a stethoscope on which the fingers of his right hand seemed to be playing a tune. His long, handsome face stared rather sardonically at me. He glanced at the watch on his bony wrist. 'Not bad. Almost exactly on time.'

My first attempt at speaking was not very successful. My second was better. 'You,' I said, 'or me?'

'Both of us.' He took a silver case from his pocket and opened it, offering the cigarettes to me. I showed him my bandaged hands. He smiled apologetically. 'The nurse will light it for you if you want one.'

'Not now. Thanks.'

He lit a cigarette for himself. 'Well, you're on the mend I'm glad to say. We put you in this room because your shouting kept the other patients awake. You're an airship-man are you?

'I am,' I said. 'I was on an airship which crashed.' I told him my name and what had happened to me. I asked where I was.

'I'm Dr Hira. This is St Charles' Hospital, Rowelsland.' He smiled ironically. 'I can see you've never heard of Rowelsland. Few have. Perhaps that's why the war hasn't touched us directly. Nobody passes this way either by air or by sea. In a few more months I wouldn't be surprised if we're the last outpost of civilization on the globe.' He drew heavily on his cigarette and glanced out of the window at the harbor. The Pakistani nurse got extra pillows and helped me sit up.

'If you can call this civilization,' said Hira. 'Are you hungry?'

'Very.'

'Good.' Hira patted the shy nun on the shoulder. 'Fetch the patient some soup, my dear.'

When the nurse had gone, closing the door behind her, I gestured with my bandaged hands. 'I thought this whole bloody place was a mirage, at first.'

Hira shrugged. 'Maybe it is. A pretty run-down dream, though. You survived Singapore, eh?'

'It's hard to believe it really happened,' I said.

'It happened. We heard.'

'So there's some communication with the outside world?'

'The mine people took all the decent equipment when they left. It was the news of Singapore that caused the evacuation. A needless panic as it turned out.'

'I see. So there's no way of contacting, say, Darwin?'

'We've a radio which occasionally works. Hand-cranked thing.'

'And those dhows are the only means of leaving the island. No ships of any kind?'

'Not any more, Mr. Bastable. The mine people scuttled our only steamer with some idea of stopping the island being used as a base for enemy shipping.' Hira pointed out of the



window of the harbor where the rusting superstructure of the wreck could still be seen.

'So I'm stuck here unless the radio can be made to work. You said it was "hand-cranked". Haven't you any proper power?'

'No more fuel. We use oil-lamps for lighting now.'

'When is there a chance of my getting a message to Darwin?'

'That depends on the state of the radio and the state of Shawcross, the operator. I'll ask someone to go up to the airpark tomorrow and see if Shawcross is sober enough to work the radio. That's about the best I can do. Eager to get back into the fray, eh?'

I looked suspiciously at him, trying to detect irony in a face, which now regarded me blandly.

'I've a duty,' I said. 'They'll need experienced airmen, after all.'

'I'm sure they will. I must be off on my rounds now. See you soon, Mr. Bastable.'

Hira raised the stethoscope in a kind of salute and left the room.

I sank back into the bed and sighed. An old radio and a drunken operator. I was pessimistic about my immediate chances of leaving Rowelsland.

A week went by and every day I grew stronger. I was making splendid recovery from what had been a very serious case of exposure. But I also grew more and more impatient and plagued Doctor Hira with questions about the radio and the condition of the operator. The news initially brought back to the hospital had been bad. Shortly after I'd arrived Shawcross had gone up on the mountain somewhere. He had taken a Chinese girl and a case of gin with him and he couldn't be found.

About ten days after I had awakened from my coma I stood by the window wearing a rather ridiculous hospital dressing gown which was too short for me, talking to Hira

who had come in to give me the latest lack of news about Shawcross. In the harbor there was a lot of confusion and noise.

Since dawn groups of half-starved Malays had been moving along the jetty, packing their possessions into one of the fishing dhows. Apparently my appearance on Rowelsland had started something. They had realized that the mining company would not be back for a long while and they had decided to try to make it to Java, in spite of their having been warned of atrocities committed on their countrymen by the Japanese. I felt sorry for those Malays. The boat would probably sink before they got more than a few miles out. Miserably I looked back into the room at Hira.

The government should be helping these people – flying in supplies or something. I wish that damned operator would turn up.'

'I think the government has a lot of problems at the moment.' Hira was sitting on my bed, fiddling with his stethoscope. He spoke almost with satisfaction. 'I don't know when we'll see Shawcross. He often goes to earth like this. He's probably hiding out in one of the mines.'

'I could have a try at working the radio myself,' I said. 'It would be better than this. I'm well enough to go out now. If you could find me a suit, perhaps . . .'

'I think we can discover something in your size. But Shawcross has locked his office up. Always does. He likes to be indispensable. It keeps his credit good at the hotel.'

'Which hotel?'

'Olmeijer's. The Royal Airpark Hotel on the edge of the airpark. It used to be the biggest. Now it's the only one. Olmeijer carries on running it from sentiment, I think.'

'I'll take a stroll out there, anyway.' I was curious to have a look at the island.

'Why not?' said Hira. 'Get to know the place. After all, you could be here for some time.' He seemed amused.

As I dressed in my borrowed suit, Hira took my place by the window. From the harbor came a babble of voices as the Malays readied the ship for the sea. He shook his head. 'They'll drown themselves for certain.'

'Won't anybody stop them?' I pulled on my jacket. The linen suit was a surprisingly good fit, as was the white shirt Hira had lent me. 'Isn't there some sort of governor here? You mentioned someone . . .'

'Brigadier L. G. A. Nesbit is the Official Representative and has been since 1920.' Hira shrugged.

'He's eighty-seven and has been senile for at least ten years. I think that's why he decided to stay when the big exodus was on. His staff now consists of a valet as old as himself and a Bengali secretary who spends his whole time making endless inventories and who hasn't, apparently, left his office since the war began. There is, of course, young Lieutenant Allsop, who commands our local military. I don't think Allsop will be sorry to see a few of his troubles going.'

'The Malays are a problem, eh?' I tried on one of the panama hats lying on the bed. It was a good fit, too.

Hira gestured wearily. 'There, are a thousand Malays and Chinese here at least. The Malays are in the main Moslems and the Chinese are chiefly Buddhists or Christians. They are, when they have nothing better to do, highly critical of each other's ways of life. And they have nothing better to do - their work went when the mine closed and now they're living off the land and sea as best they can.'

'Poor bastards,' I said.

Hira gave a peculiar smile. 'I wonder if you'll say that when they turn on the whites. They will, you know, quite soon. Presently they hate each other more than they hate Europeans, but it will take just one excuse for them to begin a general massacre. We'll all go, then. Technically, you see, the sisters and myself are regarded as Europeans.'

'And you're prepared to stay until that happens?'

'Should I go back to Ceylon and care for our Japanese conquerors?'

'You could go to Australia or even England. There must be need of doctors everywhere.'

'I should have made it plain.' Hira opened the door for me. 'I have a couple of principles. One of them is that I refuse to work for Europeans. It's the reason I came to Rowelsland in the first place.

Until the evacuation this hospital was for colored people only, Mr. Bastable.'

As I left the hospital I adjusted my hat and paused to watch the dhow easing its way past the wreck of the steamer. Every inch of its deck was covered with brown-skinned men, women and children. It brought back the terrible image of the doomed hospital ship and I could hardly bear to think what would become of them all. Slowly I started to walk along the weed-grown quay, beside deserted hotels, offices and warehouses outside which were parked the useless cars, lorries and buses.

A few disconsolate Malays were dragging their bundles back down the jetty, having failed to squeeze themselves aboard the boat. The lucky ones, I thought.

I reached a corner and turned into a narrow, silent side street lined with gray and brown featureless workers' houses and a few boarded-up shops. The street rose quite steeply and I realized how weak I still was, for I had to labor the last few paces until I reached a small square dominated by a battered statue of Edward VIII which somewhat incongruously decorated a dried-up ornamental fountain. The concrete bowl of the fountain was full of empty bottles, torn newspapers and other, less savory, refuse.

There were a few Chinese children playing around it while their mothers sat blank-faced in their doorways, staring into space. Gratefully, I sat on the edge of the fountain's bowl, ignoring the smell, which came from it and smiling at the undernourished children. They at once stopped playing and looked warily up at me.

*'Tso sun,'* I said gravely, using Cantonese. 'Good morning.'

Not one of them replied. A bit nonplussed I wished I had something to offer them. Some sweets, perhaps, for money was worthless on Rowelsland.

I removed my hat and wiped my forehead. It was growing very hot and I had become wary of the sun. I had better get on to the hotel while I could.

Then I heard the sound of hoof beats and turned in astonishment to see a rider enter the square. He looked distinctly out of place as he sat stiff-backed and arrogant in the saddle of his well-groomed cob. A tall, fair-haired Englishman of about thirty, he wore a gleaming white coat and jodhpurs with his military insignia on the jacket. His boots, belt, shoulder strap and holster were as highly polished as the badge on his solar tope. He saw me at once, but pretended that he hadn't. He stroked his blond moustache with his baton and brought his horse to a halt on the other side of the square.

I looked around at the empty, silent windows, wondering what he could be doing here.

'Get these children out of the way, sergeant!' His voice was sharp, commanding.

At this order six crisply turned out little Ghoorkas led by a sergeant emerged from another side street and waved the children back with their rifles. Their bayonets were fixed. They wore dark green uniforms with scarlet facings and they had their long, curved knives at their belts. The women needed no warnings but dragged the children inside and slammed their doors. Now I was the only civilian in the square.

'What's going on here, lieutenant?' asked.

The lieutenant turned cold, blue eyes on me. 'I would suggest, sir, that you get away from here at once. It's a police matter. There could be trouble.'

There seemed to be no point in arguing. I humored him instead. 'Thank you, lieutenant.' I walked across the square but remained in the shadows of a side street, peering curiously at what was going on.

Now the young officer dismounted and ordered his sergeant to enter one of the houses. The Ghoorkas rushed in and the lieutenant followed behind.

I watched in puzzlement, not knowing what to make of the scene at all. There was dead silence in the square for a little while, then a horrible babble of screams and yells issued from the house. I heard a woman shouting in Cantonese. There were a couple of shots and then the raised voice of the officer giving a series of orders. Another scream - a man's this time - then out into the street poured a score of coolies. They were staggering and screwing their eyes up against the sunlight. Every one of them was dazed and scared stiff.

There came another shot from inside the house and then more shouting. The coolies outside began to scatter, some rushing into nearby doorways, others running off down towards the harbor. A further series of commands came from

the officer and then a terrible wailing, the sound of flesh being struck, presumably with rifle butts.

Appalled, I was about to step forward when a panic-stricken coolie burst from the house, hesitated, glanced around wildly holding a bleeding hand, and then ran in my direction. I stepped aside to let him pass and he fled around a corner and vanished. But I had seen his pupils. The man had been drugged.

Now I understood. The soldiers were raiding some sort of local opium den.

Hearing a moan, I re-entered the square and saw that one of the opium smokers had fallen to the flagstones. He had been stabbed badly with a bayonet in his shoulder. I knelt beside him, tore back his shirt and did my best to stop the flow of blood while he stared at me in terror, small moans escaping his lips.

Boots tramped from the house.

'Good God, man, what are you doing?'

I looked up to see the lieutenant striding from the house. He looked pretty pleased with himself.

'This chap's been stabbed by one of your soldiers,' I said harshly. 'I'm trying to help him. Was there any need to—'

The lieutenant glanced contemptuously at the coolie. 'Doubtless he tried to kill someone. Crazed by opium - they all are. His own people will look after him. We're trying to teach them a lesson, after all.'

With strips of the man's shirt I bandaged up the wound as best I could. He tried to speak and then fainted. Helplessly, I tried to lift him, but it was impossible.

Now the Ghoorkas emerged holding three terrified Chinese in black and red smocks; two men and a woman, all badly bruised and probably the proprietors of the den.

The lieutenant's baton stabbed in their direction. He raised his head and spoke to the empty windows and doors. 'Now no more opium! You savvy! Opium bad! These people bad! Go to prison.'

'We lock up long time! Savvy?'

Angrily he tapped his riding boot with his baton. He glared at me and opened his mouth to speak.

'I'm going to try to get this chap to the hospital,' I said. 'Can somebody give me a hand?'

The officer took the reins of his horse and looked from me to his soldiers who held their miserable prisoners much more firmly than was necessary.

'One of your men—' I began.

The lieutenant remounted. 'I told you, sir. His own people will look after him. You obviously don't understand the conditions on this island. There's a dreadful opium problem.

It's increasing daily. They grow the poppies rather than food. I . . . '

'What else have the bastards got to live for, Allsop?' A tired drawl came from the shadowy doorway of the raided house. An English voice.

Lt Allsop turned in his saddle and shook his baton at the unseen speaker. 'You stay out of this. You're lucky we didn't arrest you, too.'

A figure emerged into the sunlight. Dressed in a dirty, faded European suit and a frayed native shirt, he was barefooted, unshaven, emaciated and plainly under the influence of opium. I knew the signs well enough, for I had once been slave to the drug's consolations. I could not make out his age, but the voice was of quite a young man from the upper middle class.

'I'd have thought you'd be ashamed...' Allsop's face was full of disgust.

'Who are you to deny them their only pleasure, Allsop?' drawled the newcomer reasonably. 'Let them alone, for God's sake.'

Lt Allsop wheeled his trim cob about and shouted an order to his men. 'All right, quick march.' He trotted away without answering the decrepit Englishman.



I watched them go, the Ghoorkas dragging their frightened prisoners back the way they had come.

The Englishman shrugged and turned to re-enter the house.

'Just a minute,' I called. 'I must try to get this chap to the hospital. He's half-dead. Could you give me a hand?'

The man leaned wearily against the doorframe. 'He'd be better off with his ancestors, believe me.'

'A moment ago you were defending these people.'

'Not defending them, old boy. I'm a fatalist, you see. I told Allsop to let them alone. And I tell you the same. What's the point? He'll die soon enough.'

But he left the doorway and shuffled into the square, blinking in the sunshine. 'Who are you, anyway?'

'I'm an airshipman. I got here a week or so ago.'

'Ah, the shipwrecked mariner. They were talking about you up at the hotel. All right, I'll help you with him, for what it's worth.'

The opium-drunk Englishman was no stronger than I was, but together we managed to carry the coolie down the street and along the quay until we reached the hospital.

After a couple of nuns had been called and had taken the wounded man away, I stood panting in the lobby, staring curiously at my helper. 'Thanks.'

He smiled slowly. 'Think nothing of it. Nothing at all. Cheerio.'

He raised his hand in a sort of ironic salute and then went out. He had gone before Dr Hira came down the stairs into the lobby.

'Who was that chap?' I asked Hira, describing the wretched Englishman.

Hira recognized the description. He fiddled with his stethoscope. 'A castaway, like yourself. He arrived in the airship, which came to take off the mine people. He chose to stay on Rowelsland. I don't know why. It meant they could take one more passenger so they didn't argue. They call him

The Captain sometimes, up at the hotel. Supposed to have been the commander of a merchant airship, which crashed in China before the war. A bit of a mystery.'

'Allsop doesn't like him.'

Hira laughed softly. 'No, Allsop wouldn't. Captain Dempsey lets the side down, eh? Allsop's for the Europeans keeping up appearances at all costs.'

'Allsop certainly works hard.' I wiped a spot of blood off my sleeve.

'I don't think he ever sleeps. His wife left with the mine people, you know. Hira glanced at his watch. 'Well, it's almost lunchtime. Fish and rice, as usual, but I've managed to get a couple of bottles of beer, if you'd . . .'

'No thanks,' I said. 'I think I'll head up to the hotel again.'

## 7. *Dead Man*

The port where I was staying was the only real town on the island. It was called New Birmingham. Its buildings were clustered close together near the waterfront and were several stories high. As they wandered up the slopes they drew apart as if fastidious of each other's squalor and grew smaller until the houses near the top were little more than isolated shanties erected in shallow hollows in the hillside.

Above the shanty district the hill leveled out for a while and became a small plateau on which the airpark had been built. Olmeijer's hotel stood on the edge of the airpark, which was now overgrown and desolate. I wondered if young Lt Allsop would have approved of the hotel, for it had certainly made an attempt to 'keep up appearances'. Its big gilt sign was brightly polished and its splendid wooden Gothic exteriors had recently been given a fresh coat of white paint. It looked out of place in its surroundings.

The rusting airship mast erected in its center dominated the airpark. To one side of the park was a single airship hangar, its gray paint peeling, and beside it a pole at which drooped a torn and filthy windsock. Near the pole stood, like the skeletons of large, unearthly insects, the remains of two hover gyros, which had been stripped of most of their essential parts. On the other side of the hangar was the shell of a light monoplane, probably the property of some long-gone sportsman, which had been similarly dismembered. The island seemed to be populated by a variety of wrecks, I thought. It seemed to be feeding off corpses, including, as in Allsop's case, the corpses of dead ideas.

After a glance towards the abandoned administration and control buildings to assure myself that they were

uninhabited, I made for the hotel.

Pushing open a pair of well-oiled double doors, I walked into the lobby. It was clean, scrubbed, polished and cool. A Malay houseboy was operating the cords of a big punka attached to the ceiling. It fanned air into my face as I entered. I was grateful for this after the heat outside but amused by the fresh incongruity. I nodded to the Malay who didn't seem to notice me and, seeing no one at the desk, strolled into the adjacent bar.

In the shady gloom were two men. One sat in his shirtsleeves behind the bar reading a book while the other sat drinking a gin fizz in the far corner near French windows opening onto a verandah. Beyond the windows I could see the airpark and beyond the airpark the slopes of the mountain, covered in thick forest.

As I seated myself on a stool by the bar the man behind it put down his book and looked at me in some surprise. He was very fat and his big, red face was beaded with sweat. His rolled up sleeves revealed a variety of tattoos of the more restrained kind. There were several gold rings on his thick fingers. He spoke in a deep, guttural accent.

'What can I do for you?'

I began apologetically, 'I'm afraid I brought no money, so . . .'

The fat man's face broke into a broad smile. 'Ja! No money! That's too bad!' He shook with laughter for a moment. 'Now, what will you drink. I'll put it on the slate, eh?'

'Very good of you. I'll have a brandy.' I introduced myself. 'Are you the hotel's proprietor?'

'Ja. I am Olmeijer, certainly.' He seemed inordinately proud of the fact. He took a large ledger from under the counter, selected a fresh page and entered my name at the top. 'Your account,' he said.

'When things are better, you can pay me.' He turned to take down a bottle of cognac.

'You've a chap called Shawcross staying here, I believe?' I said.

'Shawcross, certainly.' He put a large brandy on the bar. 'Twenty cents. On the slate.' He made an entry in the ledger and replaced it Out of sight.

It was good brandy. Perhaps it tasted even better for being the first drink I had had since Singapore. I savored it.

'But Shawcross,' said Olmeijer with a wink and a jerk of his thumb, 'has gone up the mountain.'

'And you've no idea when he'll be back.'

I heard one of the wicker chairs scrape on the polished floor, then footsteps approached me. I turned. It was the man who had been sitting near the window. He held his empty glass in his hand.

'Shawcross will be back when the gin he borrowed from Mr. Olmeijer runs out.'

He was a thin, heavily tanned man in his fifties, wearing a khaki bush shirt and white shorts. He had a small, graying moustache and his blue eyes seemed to have a permanent hint of ironic humor in them. 'My name's Greaves,' he said as he joined me at the bar. 'You must be the airship chap they found in the dugout. Singapore, eh? Must have been awful.'

Greaves told me he'd been left behind to protect the interests of the Welland Rock Phosphate Company while the rest of the white employees went back to England or Australia. He was keen to hear about the attack on Singapore. Briefly, for the memory was still hard to bear, I told him what had happened.

'I still can't believe it,' I concluded. 'There was a peace treaty.'

He smiled bitterly and sipped his drink. 'Everyone had a peace treaty, didn't they? We'd abolished war, hadn't we? But human nature being what it is . . .' He looked up at the rows of bottles in front of him, 'Bloody Japs. I knew they'd start something sooner or later. Greedy bastards!'

'The Japanese would not have blown up their own—' began Olmeijer. Greaves interrupted him with a sharp laugh.

'I don't know how that city got blown up, but it was the excuse everybody needed to start scrapping.' He tilted his glass to his lips. 'I suppose we'll never know how it happened or who did it. But that's not the point. They'd have been fighting by now even if it hadn't happened.'

'I wish you were right!'

I recognized the new voice and turned to see Dempsey walking wearily into the bar. He nodded to Greaves and me and placed a dirty hand on the counter. 'Large scotch please, Olmeijer.'

The Dutchman didn't seem pleased to see his latest customer, but he poured the drink and carefully wrote the cost down in his ledger.

There was an embarrassed pause. For all he had interrupted our conversation, Dempsey apparently wasn't prepared to amplify his remark.

'Afternoon, Dempsey,' I said.

He smiled faintly and rubbed at his unshaven chin. 'Hello, Bastable. Moving in?'

'I was looking for Shawcross.'

He took a long pull at his drink. 'There's a lot of people looking for Shawcross,' he said mysteriously.

'What do you mean?'

He shook his head. 'Nothing.'

'Another drink, Bastable?' said Greaves. 'Have this one on me.' And then, as if with a slight effort. 'You, Dempsey?'

'Thanks.' Dempsey finished his drink and put his glass back on the bar. Olmeijer poured another gin, another brandy, and another scotch.

Greaves took a case of cheroots from his shirt pocket and offered them around. Olmeijer and Dempsey accepted, but I refused. 'What did you mean, just then?' Greaves asked Dempsey. 'You don't care about all this, surely? I thought you were the chap so full of oriental fatalism.'

Dempsey turned away. For a moment his dead eyes had seemed to burn with a terrible misery. He took his glass to a nearby table and sat down. 'That's me,' he said.

But Greaves wouldn't let it go. 'You weren't in Japan when the bombing started were you?'

Dempsey shook his head. 'No, China.' I noticed that his hands were shaking as he lifted his glass to his mouth and he seemed to be muttering something under his breath. I thought I heard the words 'God forgive me'. He finished the drink quickly, got up and shambled towards the door.

'Thanks, Greaves. See you later.'

His wasted body disappeared through the doors and I saw him begin to climb the flight of wooden stairs, which led up, from the lobby.

Greaves raised his eyebrows in a quizzical look. He shrugged. 'I think Dempsey has become what we used to call an "island case". We had a few of them going native, in the old days, or taking up opium, like him. The stuff's killing him, of course, and he knows it. He'll be dead within six months, I shouldn't wonder.'

'I'd have given him longer than that,' I said feelingly. 'I've known opium smokers who live to a ripe old age.'

Greaves drew on his cheroot. 'It's not just the opium, is it? I mean, there's such a thing as a *will* to die. You know that as well as I do.'

I nodded soberly. I had encountered my own share of such desires.

'I wonder what did it,' Greaves mused. 'A woman, perhaps. He was an airshipman, you know. Perhaps he lost his ship, or deserted her or something?'

Olmeijer grunted and looked up from his book. 'He's just a weak man. Just weak, that's all.'

'Could be.' I got up. 'I think I'll head back now. Mind if I come up tomorrow? I'd like to be here when Shawcross returns.'

'See you tomorrow.' Greaves lifted his hand in a salute. 'I wish you the best of luck, Bastable.'

That night I dined on fish and fruit with Hira. I told him about my conversation at the hotel and my second encounter with Dempsey. His earlier remark had aroused my curiosity and I asked Hira if he knew anything at all of Dempsey's reasons for coming to the island.

Hira could add little about the opium eater. 'All I know is that he was in better condition when he arrived than he is now. I don't have much to do with the European community, as you may have noticed.' He looked sardonically at me. 'Englishmen often start acting strangely when they've been out

East a few years. Maybe they feel guilty about exploiting us, eh?'

I refused to rise to this and we completed our meal in relative silence.

After dinner we sat back in our chairs and smoked, discussing the health of the coolie I had found.

Hira told me he was recovering reasonably quickly. I was just about to go up to bed when the door opened suddenly and a nun rushed into Hira's room. 'Doctor - quickly - it is Shawcross!' Her face was full of anxiety. 'He has been attacked. I think he is dying.'

We hurried downstairs to the little entrance hall of the hospital. In the light from the oil lamp I saw Olmeijer and Greaves standing there. Their faces were pale and tense and they were staring helplessly down at something, which lay on an improvised stretcher they had placed on the floor. They must have carried it all the way from the hotel.

Hira crouched down and inspected the man on the stretcher. 'My God!' he said.

Greaves addressed me. 'He was dumped on the steps of the hotel about an hour ago. I think some Chinaman objected to his wife or maybe his daughter running off with Shawcross. I don't know.'



Grimly he wiped his face with his handkerchief. 'This couldn't have happened before the bloody war . . . '

I gagged as I got a good look at the battered mess of flesh on the stretcher. 'Poor devil! '

Hira straightened up and looked significantly at me. There was no hope for Shawcross. He turned to Greaves and Olmeijer. 'Can you take the stretcher up to the ward, please?'

I followed as the two men picked up the stretcher and staggered as they climbed the short flight of steps to the ward. With the nurses, I helped get him onto the bed, but it was plain that virtually every bone in his body had been broken. He was scarcely recognizable as a human being. They had taken their time in beating him up and he couldn't last long.

Hira began to fill a hypodermic. The beaten man's eyes opened and he saw us. His lips moved.

I bent to listen. 'Bloody Chinks ... bloody woman ... done for me. Found us in the mine . . . The sheets . . . Oh, God . . . The bloody clubs...'

Hira gave him a hefty injection. 'Cocaine,' he said to me. 'It's about all we have now.'

I looked at the next bed and saw the coolie I had rescued staring at Shawcross with an expression of quiet satisfaction.

'This couldn't be some sort of retaliation, could it?' I asked Hira.

'Who knows?' Hira looked down at the Australian as the man's eyes glazed and closed again.

Greaves put his fist to his lips and cleared his throat. 'I wonder if somebody ought to tell Nesbit . . . ' He looked at Shawcross and pursed his lips. 'There'll be hell to pay when Allsop hears about this.'

Hira seemed almost amused. 'It could mean the end.'

Thoughtfully, Olmeijer rubbed at his neck. 'Need Allsop be told?'

'The man has been attacked,' I said. 'A couple of hours or so and it will be murder. He can't last the night.'

'If Allsop goes on the rampage, old boy, we all stand a chance of being murdered,' Greaves pointed out. 'Allsop will anger the Malays and Chinese so much they're bound to turn on us. These aren't the old days. What do you think a dozen bloody Ghoorkas can do against a thousand coolies?'

There was a glint of malice in Hira's eyes. 'So you don't want me to report this to the Official Representative, gentlemen?'

'Better not,' said Greaves. 'We'll all keep mum, eh?'

I watched the nurse cleaning the blood from Shawcross's body. The cocaine had knocked him out completely. I walked to the door of the ward and lit a cigarette, watching the mosquitoes and the moths fluttering around the oil lamp in the lobby. From beyond the open door came the sound of the sea striking the stones of the quay. It no longer seemed peaceful. Instead the silence had become ominous. As the other three men joined me I inclined my head.

'Very well,' I said. 'I'll say nothing.'

Next morning New Birmingham was deathly quiet. I walked through empty streets. I felt a thousand pairs of eyes watched me as I made my way up to the airpark.

I did not call in at the hotel. There was no point now in hoping to see Shawcross there. He had died in the night at the hospital. I carried on past it and stood by one of the ruined hover gyros, kicking at a broken rotor, which lay on the weed-grown concrete beside the machine. From the forest behind me came the sounds of dawn. At this hour some of the nocturnal animals were still about and the diurnal inhabitants were beginning to wake. Hornbills, cockatoos, fairy bluebirds and doves fluttered among the trees, filling the air with song and with color. They seemed to be celebrating something, perhaps the end of the human occupation of the island. The air was rich with the stink of the forest, of animal spoor and rotting tree trunks. I heard

the chatter of gibbons and saw tiny shrews skipping along branches heavy with dew. On the wall of the hangar the beady eyes of lizards regarded me coldly as if I had no business to be there.

I turned towards what had been the main control building where the murdered man had locked up his wireless apparatus before going off on what was to prove his final orgy.

The whole building had been sealed before the airship personnel had left. The windows on all three stories had been covered by steel shutters and it would take special tools and a lot of hard work to get even one of them down. All the doors were locked and barred and I could see where various attempts to open them had failed.

I walked round and round the concrete building, pushing uselessly at the shutters and rattling the handles of the doors. The chirring sounds from the forest seemed to mock my helplessness and at length I stopped by a door which had evidently been in recent use, tried the handle once more, then leaned against the frame, looking back across the deserted park, with its broken bones of flying machines and its rusting mast, at the spruce hotel beyond. The sun glinted on Olmeijer's gilded sign: ROYAL AIRPARK HOTEL, it said, THE ISLAND'S BEST.

A little later someone came out through the French windows leading from the bar and stood on the verandah. Then they saw me and began to walk slowly through the tall grass towards me.

I recognized the figure and I frowned. What could he want?

## **8.**

### ***The Message***

It was Dempsey, of course. He had shaved and put on a suit slightly cleaner than the one he had worn on the previous day, but he wore the same tattered native shirt underneath it. By the pupils of his eyes I saw he had not yet had his first pipe of opium.

He shuffled towards me, coughing on the comparatively cold air of the early morning. 'I heard about Shawcross,' he said. He crossed the cracked concrete and stood looking at me.

I offered him a cigarette, which he accepted, fumbling it from my case and trembling slightly as I lit it for him.

'You knew the Chinese were after Shawcross, didn't you?' I said. 'That's what you meant yesterday when you said a lot of people were looking for him.'

'Yesterday? I don't remember.' He puffed on the cigarette, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs.

'You might have saved him, Dempsey, if you'd warned someone at the time.'

He straightened up a little and he seemed amused as he glanced towards the forest. 'On the other hand I might have done everyone else more harm. It's a bit of a luxury, a social conscience, isn't it Bastable?' He felt in his pocket. 'I came to give you this. I found it on the steps.' He held out a Yale key. 'Must have fallen from Shawcross's pocket when they dumped him.'

I hesitated before accepting the key. Then I turned and tried it in the lock. The wards clicked back and the door swung open. The interior smelled of stale liquor and burnt rubber.

'All that's left of Shawcross is his stink,' said Dempsey. 'Now you're going to try to wireless for help, I suppose.'

'I'll try,' I said. 'If I can get through to Darwin I'll ask them to reroute the first available airship to pick me up - and anyone else who wants to leave the island.'

'Better tell them it's an emergency.' Dempsey waved his hand in the general direction of the town. 'Make no bones about it. There are half a dozen excuses for an uprising now. Allsop finding out about Shawcross will be just one more. The Chinese are in a mood to slaughter all the Malays and if the whites interfere, they'll probably get together and kill us first. It's true.' A ghost of a smile appeared on his lips. 'I know. I'm in rather closer touch with the natives than most, after all. Shawcross was just a beginning.'

I nodded. 'All right. I'll tell Darwin.'

'You know how to work the wireless?'

'I've had some training

Dempsey followed me into the gloomy interior of the office. It was a filthy litter of empty beer cans, bottles and bits of broken wireless equipment. He pulled back the shutters and light came through the dusty windows. I saw what could only be the wireless set in one corner and I picked my way across the floor towards it.

Dempsey showed me the pedals underneath the bench. I sat down and put my feet on them. They turned slowly at first and then more easily.

Dempsey inspected the set. 'Seems to be warming up,' he said. He began to fiddle with the dials. There was a faint crackle from the phones. He picked them up and listened, shaking his head. 'Valve trouble, probably. You'd better let me have a go.'

I rose and Dempsey sat down in the chair. After a while he found a screwdriver and took part of the casing off the set. 'It's the valves, all right,' he said. 'There should be a box of spares behind you on the other bench. Could you bring it over?'

I found the box and placed it beside him as he continued to work.

'Did you learn about radios on airships?' I asked him.

He tightened his mouth and went on with the job.

'How did you happen to turn up here?' I said, my curiosity overcoming my tact.

'None of your bloody business, Bastable. There, that should do it.' He screwed in the last valve and began pedaling, but then he fell back in the chair coughing. 'Too bloody weak,' he said. 'You'd better do the pumping, if you wouldn't mind...' He lapsed into another fit of coughing as he got up and I replaced him.

While I pedaled, he twisted the dials again until we heard a faint voice coming through the earphones. Dempsey settled the headset over his ears and -adjusted the microphone. 'Hello Darwin, this is Rowelsland. Over.' He turned a knob.

He flipped a toggle switch and spoke impatiently into the mike. 'No, I'm sorry, I don't know our bloody call sign. Our operator's been killed as a matter of fact. No, we're not a military base. This is Rowelsland in the Indian Ocean and the civilian population is in danger.'

While I continued to pedal the generator, Dempsey told Darwin our situation. There was some confusion, a wait of nearly twenty minutes while the operator checked with his superiors, some more confusion over the location of the island and then at last Dempsey leaned back and sighed. 'Thank you, Darwin.'

As he stripped off the headset he glanced down at me. 'You're lucky. They'll have one of their patrol ships over here in a day or two - if it hasn't been shot down. You'd better tell the others to pack their bags and be ready.'

'I'm very grateful, Dempsey,' I said. 'I don't think I'd have had a chance of getting through if it hadn't been for you.'

The problems with the wireless had exhausted him. He got up and began to rummage around in the office until he

found an almost full bottle of rum. He opened it, took a long drink, and then offered it to me.

I accepted the bottle and sipped the rum, gasping. It was raw stuff. I handed it back and watched with a certain amount of respect as he finished it.

We left the office and began to walk across the airpark. As we approached the mast he paused and looked up through the girders. The passenger lift was at the top of the mast, presumably left there by the last hasty group to go aboard the ship when it had taken the bulk of the Europeans off the island. 'This won't be any good,' he said. 'Nobody to work it, even if it was in decent condition. The ship will have to come right down. It's going to be a problem. Everybody will have to muck in.'

'Will you help me?'

'If I'm conscious.'

'I heard you commanded an airship once,' I said.

Then I regretted my curiosity for a peculiar look of pained amusement came over his face. 'Yes. Yes, I did. For a very short time.'

I dropped it. 'Let me get you a drink,' I said.

Olmeijer was in his usual spot at the bar, reading his book. Greaves was not there. The Dutchman looked up and nodded to us. He made no mention of the previous night's business and I didn't bring it up. I told him that we had managed to get through to Darwin and that they were sending an airship. He seemed unimpressed. I think he enjoyed his role as the last hotelier on the island. He would rather have customers who couldn't pay than no customers at all. Dempsey and I took our drinks to one of the tables near the window.

'You've been a great help, Dempsey,' I said.

Cynically he stared at me over the rim of his glass. 'Am I helping? I may be doing you a disservice. Do you really want to go back to all that?'

'I think it's my duty.'

'Duty? To support the last vestiges of a discredited imperialism?'

It was the first time I had heard him utter anything like a political opinion. I was surprised. He sounded like a bit of a Red, I thought. I could think of no answer, which wouldn't have been impolite.

He downed the rest of his scotch and stared out over the airpark, speaking as if to himself. 'It's all a question of power and rarely a question of justice.' He looked sharply at me. 'Don't patronize me, Bastable. I don't need your kindness, thanks. If you knew . . .' He broke off. 'Another?'

I watched Dempsey walk unsteadily to the bar and then get fresh drinks. He brought them back almost reluctantly.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'It's just - well, you seem to have a lot on your mind. I thought a sympathetic ear . . .'

'There was a very strange look in his eyes now. 'Sympathetic? I wonder how sympathetic you would stay if I told you what was really on my mind. There's a war on, Bastable. I heard you speculating yesterday about how it started. I know how the war started. I know who started it, too. It was a bloody accident.'

I restrained my exclamation of astonishment and waited to hear more, but Dempsey leaned back in the wicker chair and closed his eyes, his lips moving as he spoke to himself.

I went to get him another drink, but he was already asleep when I returned. I let him sleep and joined Olmeijer at the bar.

Shortly afterwards Greaves came in. He looked tired, as if he had not been to bed since I had seen him.

'Give me a triple gin, Olmeijer, quickly. Morning, Bastable. I don't advise you to go back through the town alone. There's a lot of trouble. Big gangs of Malays and Chinese fighting each other. Arson, rape and bloody murder all over the place.'

'Has Allsop found out about . . .?'



'Not yet, but pretty well everyone else knows: He'll hear soon. The Chinese managed to steal a Malaysian boat last night and bugged off with it - probably poor Shawcross's murderers making their getaway. The Malays roughed up some Chinese families. The Chinese retaliated. I think we're in very hot water this time.'

I told him about the wireless message to Darwin and the probability of a ship coming. He looked more than relieved. 'You'd better send one of your chaps into New Brum, Olmeijer. Tell him to let everyone know - to get up here as fast as possible.'

Grumbling, Olmeijer rolled off to find a servant.

Greaves walked round to the other side of the bar. 'I think another drink is called for - on the house. Bastable?' I nodded. 'Dempsey?'

I saw that Dempsey had woken up and was making for the door. He shook his head and said with a tight, crooked smile. 'I've some business in town. Cheerio.'

'It's dangerous,' I said.

'I'll be all right. Hope to see you later, Bastable.'

We watched him leave.

'Poor bastard,' said Greaves. He shuddered and downed his gin.

## 9. ***Hopes of Salvation***

Allsop came up to the hotel in the afternoon and asked suspiciously after Shawcross. We said that we had heard he'd had some sort of accident. He didn't believe us, of course, but he had his hands full in the town and couldn't wait to question us further. He'd escorted some clergymen to the hotel and some Chinese nuns from the Catholic mission. They sat huddled in the far corner of the bar and didn't talk much to us. Nesbit's secretary, a round-faced, anxious Bengali, had come with Allsop and he remained almost constantly by the window, looking out as if he expected the airship to arrive at any minute. I asked Allsop about Dempsey and the soldier glowered at me, muttering that Dempsey had been seen with some of the Chinese 'rebels' and might find himself in real trouble with the authorities if he wasn't careful. I also learned that Hira had decided to stay on at the hospital along with most of his nuns.

By that evening a few more people had drifted up, including two Irish priests who joined the others in the corner. Olmeijer seemed delighted to have so many new guests and rushed around seeing that rooms were prepared for them. Even I received a room on the second floor.

Allsop returned looking tired and angry. His normally neat uniform was dusty and he had a bruise over his right eye. He seemed to be blaming Greaves and me for his problems and wouldn't speak to us at all on this second visit. He had brought us three of his twelve-man army for protection. The rest were remaining in the town to 'keep order', though from the noise below there was precious little of that, and to protect the Official Representative's residence, for Brigadier Nesbit, it emerged, had elected to stay, along with his valet.

Allsop rode back a little later. He was alone and as stiff-backed as ever as he guided his horse down the hill and disappeared into the darkness and the cacophony below. I don't believe he was seen alive again.

By midnight the ladies and gentlemen of the cloth had all gone to bed and Greaves, Olmeijer and myself were in our usual places at the bar while the little Bengali paced back and forth beside the windows.

Even Greaves seemed a trifle nervous and once he expressed the belief that we 'might not quite last out'. Then he, too, went to bed and the Bengali followed him. Olmeijer had his big account book open on the bar and for a while seemed cheerfully engrossed in his arithmetic before closing the book with a crash, nodding goodnight to me, and heaving his huge bulk away to his own quarters.

Now, save for the Ghoorkas on guard outside, I was the only one up. I felt exhausted but not particularly sleepy. I decided to go outside and see if I could detect any activity in the town.

As I entered the lobby I heard voices by the main entrance. I peered out, but the oil lamp wasn't bright enough to show me anything. I opened the door. One of the Ghoorka guards was shouting at a man I could dimly see in the moonlight. The Ghoorka gestured with his bayoneted rifle and the man turned away. For a moment I saw his face in the faint glow from the lamp in the lobby. I pushed past the soldier and hurried outside.

'Dempsey? Is that you?'

He looked back. His shoulders were bowed and his jacket had been ripped. His face was deathly pale, his eyelids almost closed. 'Hello, Bastable.' The speech was slurred -the voice of a cretin.

'Thought this was my hotel.'

'It is.' I went towards him and took a limp arm. 'Come inside.'

The Ghorka made no attempt to stop us as I took Dempsey into Olmeijer's. The man was staggering and shivering. A dry retching noise came from his throat. He was gripping something tightly in his right hand. There was no point in questioning him and I did my best to get him up the stairs and along the passage to his room.

The door was unlocked. I half-carried Dempsey in, let him sit on the bed while I lit the oil lamp.

The light revealed a room, which was surprisingly neat. The bed was made up and there was no litter. In fact the room was completely impersonal. I got Dempsey onto the bed and he stretched out with a sigh. The shivering came in brief spasms now. He blinked and looked up at me as I took his pulse.

'Thank you very much, Bastable,' he said. 'I thought I might have a word with you.'

'You're in bad shape,' I said. 'Better sleep if you can.'

'They're looting down there,' he said. 'Killing each other. Perhaps it's something in the air...' He coughed and then started to choke. I got him upright and tried to pry the packet he held from his fingers, but he reacted angrily, with surprising strength. He pulled his hand away. 'I can look after myself now, old man.' There were tears in his eyes as he sank back onto the pillow. 'I'm just tired. Sick and tired.'

'Dempsey, you're killing yourself. Let me—'

'I hope you're right, Bastable. It's taking too bloody long, though. I wish I'd had the guts to do it properly.'

I stood up, telling him that I would call back later to see how he was. He closed his eyes and seemed to fall asleep.

I had that feeling of impotence common to many who have themselves experienced the relief of drug addiction. I knew only too well that there was little I could do for the poor, tormented wretch. He could only help himself. And Dempsey seemed genuinely haunted, perhaps by a special insight into things, as they really were, perhaps by something in himself, some aspect of his own character,

which he could not reconcile with his moral outlook. For it was becoming increasingly clear that Dempsey, in spite of his denials, had a very moral outlook and that he didn't think much of himself.

I went to my own room along the passage and took off my jacket and trousers. I lay down on the bed in the darkness, listening to the insects hurling themselves against the woven wire of the window screens. Moonlight flooded the room. Soon I fell into a light sleep.

I woke up suddenly.

My door was creaking as it slowly opened and I looked around for a weapon, thinking that the coolies had attacked the hotel-while I slept.

Then, with a sigh of relief, I saw that it was Dempsey. He was leaning almost nonchalantly on the door handle. His face was as pale as ever but he seemed to have recovered his strength.

'Sorry to disturb you Bastable.'

'Do you need help?' I got up and pulled on my trousers:

'Perhaps I do. There isn't a lot of time now.' He smiled. 'Not "practical" help, though.' His eyes were glazed and dreamy and I realized that he had taken some kind of stimulant to offset the effects of the opium. I hated to think what was happening both to his mind and his body. He sat down heavily on my bed.

'I'm fine.' He spoke as if to reassure himself. 'I just thought I'd drop in for a chat. You wanted a chat, eh? Earlier.'

I sat down in the wicker armchair beside the bed. 'Why not?' I said as cheerfully as I could.

'I told you there's no need to patronize me. I've come to make a sort of confession. I don't know why it should be you, Bastable. Possibly it's just because, well, you're one of the victims. Singapore and everything . . .'

'It's over,' I said. 'And it certainly couldn't have been anything to do with you. "The War is ceaseless. The most we

can hope for are occasional moments of tranquility in the midst of the conflict". I quote Lobkowitz.'

His drugged eyes shone for a second with an ironic light. 'You read him, too. I didn't think you were another Red, Bastable.'

'I'm not. Neither, for that matter, is Lobkowitz.'

'It's a matter of opinion.'

'Besides, I speak from a great deal of experience.'

'As a soldier?'

'I have been a soldier. But I have come to the conclusion that the human race is constantly in a state of tension, that those tensions make us what we are and that they will often lead to wars. The greater our ingenuity at inventing weapons, the worse the wars become.'

'Oh, indeed, I agree with that last statement.' He sighed. 'But don't you believe it's possible for people to acknowledge the tensions and yet make harmony from those tensions, just as music is made?'

'My experience would have it otherwise. My hope, of course, is another thing. But I see little point in such a debate when the world is currently in such an appalling state. This frightful Armageddon will probably not be over until the last aerial man-o'-war falls from the skies.'

'You really see it as Armageddon?'

I could not tell him what I knew: that I had already passed through three alternative versions of our world and in each seen the most hideous destruction of civilization; that I myself felt responsibility for at least one of those great wars. I merely shrugged. 'Perhaps not. Perhaps there will be peace. The Russians and the Japanese have always been at loggerheads. What I can't understand is how Britain failed to stop it and why the Japs turned on us with such ferocity.'

'I know why,' he said.

I patted his arm. 'Do you know? Or is it the opium telling you? I've been fond of opium in my time, Dempsey. My

appearance was once not too different from yours. Can you believe that?'

'I thought there was something. But why—?'

'I took part in a crime,' I said. 'A very wicked crime. And then . . .' I paused. 'Then I became lost.'

'But you're not lost now?'

'I'm lost now, but I've decided to make the best of things. I've become a good airshipman. I love airships. There is nothing like being at the helm of one.'

'I know,' he said. 'Of course I know. But I'll never go aloft again.'

'Something happened? An accident?'

A small, wretched laugh came out of his throat. 'You could call it that.' He fumbled in his pocket and took something out, placing it on the bed beside him. It was a syringe. 'This stuff makes you want to talk, unlike the opium.' From his other pocket he took a handful of ampoules and placed them neatly beside the syringe.

I got up. 'I can't let you—'

His eyes were full of pain. 'Can't you?' The words had intense significance. They silenced me. I sat down again with a shrug.

He put his hand over the syringe and the ampoules and stared at me grimly. 'You've no choice. I've no choice. Our choices are all gone, Bastable. For my own part, one way or another, I'm going to kill myself. You can take that for granted. And I'd rather you let me do it this way.'

'I know the state of mind you're in, old man. I was in it once. And, without wishing to make a stupid comparison, I feel I've had as much reason as anyone on Earth to want to do it. But you see me alive. I've gone beyond suicide.'

'Well, I haven't.' Yet he hesitated. 'I wanted to talk to you, Bastable.'

'Then talk.'

'I can't without this stuff.'

Once again, I shrugged. But I knew what it was to have an unbearable weight on one's conscience. 'Take a little, then,' I suggested. 'Just a little. And talk. But don't try to kill yourself, at least until you have confided in me.'

He shuddered. 'Confided! What a word. You sound like a priest.'

'Just a fellow-sufferer.'

'You're a bit of a prig, Bastable.'

I smiled. 'So I've been told by others.'

'Yet you're a decent sort. And you don't judge people much. Only yourself. Am I right?'

'I'm afraid you probably are.'

'You don't hold with socialism, do you? With my brand, at any rate.'

'What's your brand?'

'Well, Kropotkin called it anarchism. But the word's come to mean something very different in the public mind.'

'You don't blow things up, then?'

Again he began to shake. He tried to speak, but no words came. I had, accidentally, struck a nerve. I moved towards him. 'I'm sorry, old man. I didn't mean . . .'

He drew away from me. 'Get out,' he said. 'For God's sake leave me alone.'

I felt very foolish. 'Dempsey. Believe me. I meant nothing serious. I was being facetious.'

'Get out!' It was almost a shout, a plea. 'Get out, Bastable! The ship's coming. Save yourself, if you can.'

'I'm not going to let you kill yourself.' I grabbed up some of the ampoules. 'I want to listen, Dempsey.'

He fell back on the bed. His head hit the wall. He groaned. His body fell sideways. He had passed out.

I checked his pulse and his breathing, and then I went to look for help. I recalled that there was a missionary doctor now in the hotel.

As I reached the ground floor and headed to the bar where I would find Olmeijer, I heard people near the windows begin



to mutter, then to talk excitedly. A beam of bright light suddenly broke the darkness outside.

Olmeijer saw it. He seemed disappointed. When I reached him he muttered: 'it's the ship. It's coming in.' He was going to lose all his customers.

I told him to send someone to look after Dempsey, and then I ran from the hotel towards the park. My intention was to guide the ship to her mast.

To my astonishment there were already uniformed men on the ground. I rushed towards one. They must have parachuted from the ship.

'Thank God you've come,' I said.

'The nearest figure turned. I looked into the expressionless face of a captain in the Imperial Japanese Army. 'Go back inside,' he said. 'Tell them that if anyone attempts to leave the building it will be bombed to rubble.'

## **10.**

### ***Lost Hopes***

We were never to discover how the Japanese had found us. Either they had traced the wireless messages or they had trailed and destroyed the rescue ship. The fact was there was nothing we could do against them.

Soon Olmeijer's place was full of small soldiers in off-white uniforms, their politeness to their prisoners contrasting with the long bayonets fixed on their rifles. The officer had a grim, self-controlled manner, but occasionally, it seemed to me, an expression of straightforward hatred crossed his face when he looked at us. We stood with our baggage (if we had any) in the middle of the floor.

The women were sent aboard first. The Japs had managed to get the mast working and had winched the ship to ground level.

It was a large, modern ship. I was surprised that they had felt they could spare it, merely to pick up a few civilians, but I guessed that it had already been patrolling the area when its captain had been alerted to our presence.

Greaves was closer to the windows than I. He turned to me. 'My God, they've fired the town!' He pointed, addressing the officer. 'You damned barbarians! Why did you have to do that?'

'Barbarians?' The Japanese captain smiled sardonically. 'I am amused you should think that of us, Englishman, after what you did to us.'

'We did nothing! Whatever happened was a mistake. It suits you to blame us.'

The captain dismissed this. 'However, we have not set fire to the buildings. It's your own workers. A riot of some kind. I gather they're on their way, *en masse*.'

It was credible. Thinking that they might get free of the island aboard a ship, the coolies could have persuaded themselves that it was possible to capture the vessel and sail it to freedom.

'Don't worry,' continued the Jap, 'we intend to protect you as well as ourselves.' His voice, pleasant and yet sharp, had a degree of contempt in it. I saw that Greaves was upset by the exchange.

Greaves blustered a little, but he could not argue with the man's logic. We had far more to fear from the coolies, immediately at any rate, than from the Japanese.

It was possible to smell the smoke from where we stood; and traces of red firelight were reflected in the windows and mirrors of Olmeijer's. The Dutchman had given up his despair and was now offering to serve drinks to his new customers (as he saw them). I think he had half a hope that Rowe Island was to be occupied and that he would be allowed to continue (as a neutral) to run the hotel. The soldiers motioned him to join us at the center of the floor. He sat down on one of his own tables. I thought he might be going to cry. 'I am Dutch,' he told the officer. 'I am a private hotelier. A civilian. You cannot just remove me from the place I have spent most of my life building.'

'We have orders to arrest all Europeans,' said the Japanese. 'And you are most definitely European, sir. We have nothing against the Dutch. However, if you were to be realistic you would understand that your country is an ally of Britain and that it is only a matter of days before you are involved in this war.'

'But we are not involved today!'

'Not as far as I know. Essentially our mission is to evacuate you from the island.'

'And what will happen to us?' asked Greaves, still in an aggressive mood.

'You will be interned for the duration of hostilities.'

'We're not spies!'

'Neither were those you interned in your South African war, you'll recall.'

'That was entirely different. The reasons were complex

'Our reasons are also complex. You are foreign belligerents, potentially dangerous to our War Effort.'

'My God! And you infer that we are hypocritical!'

'You will not deny, sir, that this is effectively a military base.'

'It's a mining concern!'

'But very useful as a fuelling station. We shall be leaving troops behind. A garrison. This is conquered territory. When you go outside you will see that the Japanese flag now flies over the airfield.'

'Then why remove us? Is it usual practice?'

'It has become so. You will be interned at the European civilian prisoner-of-war camp on Rishiri.'

'Where the hell is Rishiri?'

'It's a small island off the coast of Hokkaido,' said one of the Irish priests. Hokkaido was the large island North of Honshu, Japan's main island. 'Quite a pretty place, as I recollect. We did some missionary work there a few years ago.'

The Japanese captain smiled. 'You'll have to concentrate on Europeans now, Father. But you will have plenty of time to make converts, I'm sure.'

Greaves fell silent. He finished the last of his gin fizz with the air of a man who was not likely to see another again for many years.

With the women gone, the older men were next to be taken from the room. The Japanese were by no means cruel to us. Those who were too weak to move easily were helped by soldiers, who even carried bundles and suitcases for their prisoners, shouldering their rifles in order to do so. There was no point in trying to resist them, and they knew it. The ship's guns could have destroyed Olmeijer's in seconds, and we had so many other people to consider.

A few minutes later the Japanese captain went outside and then returned to issue commands to his men. The rifles were unshouldered and they ran into the night, leaving only one man to guard us. We heard shouts, then shots; a terrible scream, which rose and fell, then rose again: the scream of a mob.

'The coolies!' Olmeijer waddled towards the window. We all followed him. The guard did not attempt to stop us. He stood by the door, looking back in some trepidation.

The red firelight silhouetted the Malays and Chinese now trying to rush the airship, which was defended by a line of well-disciplined Japanese soldiers. The coolies were badly armed, though one or two had rifles and pistols. For the most part the best weapons they had been able to muster were parangs and large picks and hammers. Panic, anger and hatred drove them against the rifle-fire. Not a bullet was wasted. They continued to fall until the corpses of the dead and wounded hampered the advance of those who still lived.

They appeared to have some sort of rough organization, however, because they now fell back. Their efforts were being directed by a figure in a crumpled European suit armed with a pistol.

I recognized him as he disappeared with the surviving coolies into the darkness.

How Dempsey had managed to leave the hotel in the condition in which I'd last seen him I didn't know. But there he was, capering like a maniac, trying to help the coolies in their desperate attack.

They came in from two sides now, trying to divide the Japanese fire. This time two or three soldiers were hit. They retreated in order until they were closer to the ship.

Greaves whispered to me: 'this would be our chance to get out of here. Rush the guard and get into the bush, eh?'

I considered this. 'Between the Japanese and the surviving coolies we'd have no chance,' I said. 'There isn't any food to speak of, either.'

'You've no guts, Bastable.'

'Perhaps. But I've a great deal of experience,' I told him. 'There's quite likely to be an exchange of civilian prisoners of war. We could all be in England in a matter of weeks.'

'But what if we're not?'

'My view is that we'll be better off with the Japs for the moment. If we're going to escape, let's escape from somewhere closer to Russian territory.'

Greaves was disgusted. 'You're not exactly impetuous, are you Bastable?'

'I suppose not.' I had seen too much of warfare and destruction in three worlds to place much value on romantic. Impulsive schemes. I preferred to bide my time. I let Greaves think what he liked and noticed that, without my agreement, he made no attempt to get free of Olmeijer's.

The firing outside continued but was more spasmodic. Below, in the town, the flames were rising higher. Firelight was reflected on the white hull of the Japanese ship as it swayed slowly at its mast.

Dempsey must have made full use of his stimulants. From time to time I saw him, sometimes with a pistol, sometimes with a parang, leaping here and there amongst the shrubs and trees surrounding the airpark. He was demented. For what obscure, perhaps sentimental, reasons he had leagued himself with the coolies, I could not fathom. Perhaps he saw hope in turning them against the Japanese and saving the Europeans, but I doubted it. In his ragged jacket and trousers he was distinguished from the rabble largely by the fact that he was evidently in control. He had been trained in the navy and his old instincts for leadership were coming out.

The Japanese had also identified him and their fire was concentrated against him. He was courting their bullets. To me, it seemed he wanted them to kill him. He had been talking of suicide and perhaps this was in his eyes a more positive way of dying. Nonetheless he showed courage and I

could only admire the way he harried the Japs, sending in coolies from every direction, sometimes at once, sometimes from a single angle.

His eyes glittered; filled with flames. There was a strange, cold grin on his lips. And for a moment I was consumed by an enormous sense of comradeship for him. It was as if I looked at some other incarnation of myself, in those dreadful days before I had learned to live with the guilt, the pain and the hopelessness of my own situation.

Then Dempsey rushed for the ship, all the remaining coolies at his back. He hacked down two soldiers before they could defend themselves. He fenced with the parang, warding off bayonets and bullets. He took another two of the Japanese and had actually reached the gangway into the gondola when, both arms lifted as if to some blood-greedy battle-god, he dropped.

I saw his body lying spread-eagled on the gangway. It twitched for a moment or two. I didn't know if a bullet had struck him or if the stimulants had caused a stroke. The captain, sword in hand, ran up to the body and turned it over, instructing two of his men to drag it inside.

I heard one of the soldiers utter his name: 'Dempsey'. And I wondered how on earth they could know him.

With Dempsey down, the coolies were quickly scattered. The captain returned to Olmeijer's and ordered the rest of us aboard the ship. I asked him: 'how's the white man? Is he shot? Did he collapse?' But the captain refused to answer.

Greaves said: 'Look here, captain. You could tell us if Dempsey's alive or dead!'

The Japanese drew in his breath and looked hard at Greaves. 'You have certain rights as a civilian prisoner of war. Captain Dempsey also has certain rights. However, I am not obliged to answer enquiries as to the fate of another prisoner.'

'You inhuman devil. It's not a question of rights, but simple decency!'

The Japanese captain gestured with his sword and gave a command in his own tongue. The guards began to march us out.

As we left, I heard him say: 'if we were not a civilized people none of you would be alive now. And Captain Dempsey would have been torn to pieces by my men.'

The captain seemed mad. Perhaps he did not enjoy his trade. Many soldiers did not, when real warfare developed.

I wondered what crime Dempsey had committed to make him so loathed by those who believed him guilty of it. It was almost certain, anyway, that he had paid the price of the crime with his life. I regretted very much that he had not had time to tell me his own story.

An hour later we were aloft, leaving the remnants of Rowelsland and its population behind. Through a small porthole I could see the flames spreading through the town. They had even caught some of the foliage. Small figures ran about in the inferno. It was still possible to hear shots as the Japanese continued to defend their newly conquered territory. Our quarters were crowded, but not intolerable. Dempsey was not amongst us. Everyone assumed he had been killed.

It was dawn by the time we had gained our cruising altitude. Most of us were silent, dozing to the steady drumming of the engines. I suppose we were all wondering what would become of us once we reached the civilian camp on Rishiri. If the War continued, as I had known other wars to continue, then it might be years before we were free.

I realized, with no particular dismay that I might even die of old age before this particular conflict were resolved.

I was almost relieved that in no way was my fate any longer in my own hands.



## **Part Two**

**'Neither Master nor Slave!'**

# 1.

## ***The Camp on Rishiri***

The civilian prisoner-of-war camp was well organized and clean. The food was simple and adequate and our treatment was by no means harsh. There was a permanent Red Cross supervisor and a representative of the Swiss Government who had elected at the invitation of the Japanese to act as a sort of umpire. There were civilians of most nationalities here and those belonging to neutral countries (no longer the Dutch) were efficiently repatriated, so long as they could prove their identity and place of origin. There were a good many angry Poles, Bohemians and Latvians present, for instance.

Technically they were Russian citizens, but vociferously denied their loyalty to any land save their own. Since Poles and Czechs were fighting in Russian armies there was not a great deal of weight to their protestations.

I found the mixture of races fascinating and made the most of my imprisonment to learn as much as I could about the world in which I had found myself. Here was a future in which O'Bean had not existed; yet it contained many of the inventions familiar to me in that future where I had originally encountered General O. T. Shaw. It seemed that whether they were the work of an individual genius or a variety of hard-working scientists, the airships and the sub aquatic boats, the electrical wonders, the wireless telegraph and so on, would nonetheless come into existence at some time. In this world Britain's Empire was even larger than in my own. Certain mainland territories in South and Central America were hers, as were some parts of what I had known as the Southern United States. These had been regained; it appeared, during the American Civil War, when Britain had

leant positive support to the Confederacy in return for control over coastal regions. With the victory of the Confederacy it had suited everyone, I learned, to retain this contact. The lands had been leased from the CSA for a period of a hundred years. This meant that in thirty years' time, the Confederacy would reclaim them. I was curious as to whether slavery continued to flourish and learned to my surprise that not only did it not, but that economically it had suited everyone to see a strong black middle class emerging. In America there was greater racial equality than in my own day! North and South were virtually autonomous and these smaller units seemed to have produced greater coherence rather than less. Although America was not quite so rich in industry, not quite so powerful a military nation, she seemed in many other ways to have benefited from the truce, which had followed the Civil War and allowed both sides to recover and begin to trade.

France, on the other hand, was no longer a Great Power. She had never recovered from the Franco-Prussian Wars. Germany now controlled much of the old French Empire and the French themselves seemed content enough in the main, without the responsibilities of their colonies. Germany had become a close ally of Britain, although not bound to join in the current conflict. She formed part of an alliance with the Scandinavian countries; a very powerful trading pact which suited everyone. Austria-Hungary moldered on, a romantic, decaying Empire, constantly in debt, constantly being helped out by richer nations. The only new Great Power of any significance was the Ottoman Empire, which had expanded significantly into Africa and the Middle East to form a strong Islamic union.

Greece, I learned, was all but non-existent. Most of her people were now Moslems and to all intents and purposes Turkish. The Japanese Empire controlled large areas of what had been China and her inroads along borders of the Russian Empire had been the chief reason for the present

struggle. I learned why the Japanese attacked British targets with far greater ferocity than they attacked others. They believed that Britain had deliberately started the War, with a raid on Hiroshima. I was reminded of my own part - my own guilt - in a similar raid, when I had sailed aboard the flagship of General Shaw.

If I had known only one world I might have thought that History was repeating itself, but I knew that it was human nature, which lay at the root of History and that no matter where I found myself, I was bound to discover superficial similarities expressing and exemplifying that nature. It was human idealism and human impatience and human despair which continued to produce these terrible wars. Human virtues and vices, mixed and confused in individuals, created what we called 'History'. Yet I could see no way in which the vicious circle of aspiration and desperation might ever be broken. We were all victims of our own imagination. This I had realized in all my strange journeys across what Mrs. Persson calls 'the multiverse'. The very thing which makes us human, which produces the best, is also the thing which will make us behave worse than the maddest wild beast could ever behave. We live through example and emulation, which can turn into envy if circumstances create for us misfortunes. That is all I have come to believe, and I am not entirely sure I believe that. But I am reconciled to human nature, if not to human folly, and that is what my own particular misfortunes have achieved for me.

Olmeijer was soon in his element once again. He somehow managed to get himself put in charge of the camp shop and ran it with all the grandeur of a Chef de la Maison at the Ritz.

Greaves joined a group of English and Australian merchant seamen who had been captured at the fall of Shanghai. They spent most of their time choosing sides for Rugby football games and talking about Home. I supposed that this was how they managed to avoid thinking too much

about the truth of their situation, but I could only stand half-an-hour or so of their schoolboy stuff. I knew very well that not long before my first visit to Teku Benga I might well have joined in with some enthusiasm. I had changed beyond redemption. I would never be quite the same as that idealistic and naive young army officer who had first led his men into the mountains in search of the bandit, Sharan Kang. I felt, indeed, like a cross between Rip van Winkle and the Flying Dutchman, with a touch of the Wandering Jew besides. I sometimes felt that I had lived for as long as the human race had existed.

Quite soon after arriving at the camp I myself fell in with a mixed bag of civilian airshipmen, the survivors of a variety of wrecks. Some had been accidentally shot down; others had been rescued by Japanese patrols. Some had simply been lost in the general chaos and wandered into Japanese hands. I learned that all merchant airships now moved in convoys these days, protected by military vessels.

It was about a week later that Harry Birchington attached himself to me. He was a thin-faced, angular man, with an awkward, unspontaneous way of moving, a flat forehead and cheekbones and a reddish discoloration under the eyes of the sort I often identify with a certain mental imbalance. He approached me as I came out of Olmeijer's hut. He regarded me, he said, as a fellow intellectual; someone who had a bit more education than most of these riff-raff'. Since there were a number of clergymen and academics amongst the prisoners in our compound alone, as well as a couple of journalists, I did not find his remarks particularly flattering. He wore a khaki shirt and a striped tie, gray flannel trousers and, no matter what the temperature, would often have on a tweed sports-jacket with leather patches on the elbows. He was a bore. He was, in fact, the camp bore. Every army unit has one, every airship crew has one, and every office and factory in the world doubtless has one. However, Birchington was, I'll admit, a bit above the average.

He drew me across the compound to the wire fence corner. Leaning against one of the struts of the fence was a short, moody Slav in a dirty peasant shirt. I had seen him before. His name was Makhno and he was from the Ukraine. For bizarre idealistic reasons of his own he had elected to make his way to Tokyo in the cause of international brotherhood. He was an anarchist, I gathered, of the old Kropotkin school and, I thought then, like most anarchists would rather talk than anything else. He was a likeable enough fellow who, having failed to convert the camp, kept his own counsel. Birchington introduced us. 'This chap's not too good with the English,' he said. 'I talk a spot of Rooshian, but I'm having trouble getting through to him. We were talking about money.'

'You're trying to buy something?' I asked.

'No, no. *Money*. International finance and that.'

'Aha.' I exchanged glances with the Ukrainian, who raised a sardonic eyebrow.

'Now I'm a socialist, right?' continued Birchington. 'Have been all my life. You might ask what we mean by the word socialism, and you'd be correct in doing so, because socialism can mean many different things to many different people...' He went on in this vein, doubtless word for word repeating himself for the nth time. There are some people who never appear to realize to what degree they have this habit. I have come to believe that it has the effect on them of a soothing lullaby sung to them. It has a completely opposite effect, of course, on anyone attempting (or forced) to listen to them.

The anarchist, Makhno, was not bothering to listen. It was obvious that he could understand many of the words but that he had instinctively recognized Birchington's type.

'Now *this* chap,' Birchington stabbed an unhealthy finger in Makhno's direction, 'would also call himself a socialist. I suppose the term would be "anarcho-socialist". That is to say, he believes in the brotherhood of man, the

emancipation of the working classes of the world and so on and so forth. He comes, after all, from a so-called socialist country, though what it's doing with an emperor still there, for all he's got no real power, I don't know. And he's against his own government.'

The Russian government,' said Makhno. 'I am against all governments. Including the so-called Ukrainian Rada, which is only a puppet of the Central Government in Petersburg.'

'Just so,' said Birchington, dismissing this. 'So you're a socialist and you're against socialists. Am I right or wrong?'

'Kerensky's Duma is socialist in name only,' said Makhno in deep, Slavic tones. 'In name only.'

'Exactly my own point. Not proper socialists. Just Tories under another name, right?'

'Politicians,' said Makhno laconically.

'That's where you're wrong, old chap. Just because they're not real socialists doesn't mean that real socialists can't make good politicians.'

I was already trying to extricate myself from this, but Birchington held on to my arm. 'Hang on a minute, old man. I want you to umpire this one. Now, what do we mean by this word "politics" of ours? See, I'm an engineer by profession, and I like to think a pretty good one, and to me politics is just a matter of getting the engineering right. If you have a machine which functions properly without much attention, then it's obviously a good machine. That's what politics should be about. And if the machine has simple working parts which any layman can understand, then it's, as it were, your democratic machine. Am I right or am I wrong?'

'Crazy,' said Makhno, and scratched his nose.

'What?'

'You're not right or wrong. You're crazy.'

This amused me and Makhno could tell, but Birchington was baffled.

'Sane, I'd say,' he said. 'Very sane indeed. Like a good machine. That's sane, isn't it? What's more sane than a

properly functioning steam turbine, for instance?'

'Rationalist nonsense,' pronounced Makhno, and rolled the 'r' in that ironic way only Slavs have.

'And what about your own romantic twaddle?' Birchington wanted to know. 'Blow everything up and start again, eh?'

'No worse a solution than yours. But this is not what I argued.'

'It's what it comes down to, old chap, that's your anarchism for you. Boom!' And he laughed as one who had never known humor.

Although I felt sorry for Makhno (while having little sympathy with his politics) I had had quite enough of this. With a murmur of vague apology I began to move away, to where some of my acquaintances were standing, smoking their pipes and talking airship talk, which at that moment was preferable to anything Birchington had to offer.

Birchington stopped me. 'Hang on just a sec, old man. What I want you to tell me is this: without government, who makes the decisions?'

'The individual,' said Makhno.

I shrugged. 'Given the hypothesis as it's put,' I said, 'our Ukrainian friend is absolutely right. Who else could make a decision?'

'Just for himself?'

'By consensus,' said Makhno.

'Ha!' Birchington was triumphant. 'Ha! And what's that, but democratic socialism. Which is exactly what I believe in.'

'I thought you believed in machines.' couldn't resist this jab.

Birchington missed my small irony as he had missed all Makhno's. 'A democratic - socialist - machine.' He said, as if to a child.

'That is not anarchism,' said Makhno stubbornly. But he was not trying to convince Birchington. If anything, he was trying to drive him away.



'I can see some of my pals want a word,' I said to Birchington. I winked at Makhno and made off. But Birchington pursued me. 'You're an airshipman by all accounts, as are these fellows. Don't you believe in using the best machinery, the engines least likely to let you down, the control systems which will work as simply as possible . . .?'

'Airships aren't countries,' I said. Unfortunately an unsuspecting second officer from the destroyed *Duchess of Salford* heard me without noticing Birchington.

'They can be,' he said. 'Like small countries. I mean, everyone has to learn to get on together . . .'

I left him to Birchington. When he realized what he had let himself in for a look of patent dismay crossed his young face. I waved at him behind Birchington's back and sauntered off.

It was to be one of my easier escapes from the Bore of Rishiri. The fact that I was a prisoner and beginning, like many others, to fret a great deal was bad enough. It was Purgatory. But Birchington was making it Hell. I am still surprised that nobody murdered him. He became impossible to avoid.

At first we tried joshing him to get rid of him and then laughing at him, then downright rudeness, but it was useless to try to insult him or alter him in his course. We would sometimes offend him, but he would either laugh it off, if hurt, return in a few minutes. And I had everyone's sympathy because he continued, no matter what I said or did, to claim me as his closest friend.

I think that must be why, when Greaves approached me with his half-baked escape plan, I agreed to join in against all common sense. He and his fellow Rugger enthusiasts meant to go under the wire at night and try to capture one of the two Japanese motor-torpedo-boats which had recently anchored in Rishiri's tiny harbor. From there Greaves and Co. intended to try for the Russian mainland, which had not fallen to the Japs.

There had been a number of attempted escapes, of course, but all of them had been unsuccessful. Our guards were vigilant; there were two small scouting airships keeping the tiny island under surveillance, there were searchlights, dogs, and the whole paraphernalia of a prison. Moreover the island was used as a fuelling station for raids against Russia (which is why we were there - to stop the base from being bombed) so it usually had several large airships at mast near the harbor.

It was true, as Greaves argued, that no military aerial vessels were in evidence at that moment, but I was not sure that, as he put it, this was 'the best chance of getting clear we'll ever have'.

I did believe that there was a small chance of escape as well as a fair chance of being killed or wounded. But I argued to myself that even if I were wounded I should spend time in the hospital away from Birchington.

'Very well, Greaves,' I said. 'You can count me in.'

'Good man.' He patted my shoulder.

That night we assembled in twos and threes at Olmeijer's shop. The Dutchman was not in evidence. He would have been too portly to squeeze himself into the tunnel.

Greaves and his Rugger chums had been digging. It was usual to meet in the hut in the evening, to play table tennis or the variety of board games supplied by the Red Cross. We had only occasional trouble from the guards, who were inclined to look in on us at random. Because they did not check our numbers, we stood a fair chance of all getting down the tunnel before they suspected anything. A few of the airshipmen had elected to stay behind to cover us.

Greaves was to go first and I was to go last. One by one the men disappeared into the earth. And it was as I was about to follow them that I realized Fate was almost certainly singling me out for unusual punishment. Birchington walked through the door of the hut.

I was halfway down. I think I remember smiling at him weakly.

'My lord, old man! What are you up to?' He asked. Then he brightened. 'An escape, eh? Good show. A secret is it? Shan't breath a word. I take it anyone can join in.'

'Urn,' I said. 'Actually Greaves . . . ' 'my pal Greaves, eh? His idea. Jolly good. That's all right with me, old man. I trust Greaves implicitly. And he'd want me along.'

One of the airshipmen near the window hissed that a couple of guards were on their way.

I ducked into the tunnel and began to wriggle along it. There was no time to argue with Birchington. I heard his voice behind me:

'Make way for a little 'un.'

I knew that he had joined me in the tunnel before the light vanished as the airshipmen above replaced the floorboards.

I seemed to crawl for eternity, with Birchington muttering and apologizing, constantly bumping into my feet, criticizing what he called the 'poor engineering job of the tunnel. He wondered why they hadn't thought of asking him for his expert help.

We emerged into sweet-smelling darkness. Behind us were the wire and the lights of the camp. We were close to the earth road, which wound down to the harbor. Greaves and the merchant seamen were whispering and gesticulating in the darkness, just as if they were still choosing sides for a game.

Birchington said in a voice which seemed unnaturally loud, even for him: 'what's the problem? Need a volunteer?'

Greaves came up to me urgently. 'Good God, man. Why did you tell him?'

'I didn't. He found out just as the guards were on their way.'

'I thought you could do with an extra chap,' said Birchington. 'So I volunteered. Don't forget I'm an expert

engineer.'

I heard someone curse and murmur: 'Shoot the blighter.' Birchington, of course, was oblivious.

Greaves sighed. 'We'd better start getting down to the harbor. If we're separated—'

He was interrupted by the unmistakable sounds of airship engines high overhead. 'Damn! That complicates things.'

The sound of the engines grew louder and louder and it was evident that the ships were coming in lower. We began to duck and weave through the shrubs and trees at the side of the road, heading for the harbor.

Then, suddenly, there was light behind us, and gunfire, the steady pounding of artillery. A dying scream as a bomb descended some distance from the camp. Up the road came several trucks full of soldiers, as well as a couple of armored cars and some motor-bicycles. The firing continued until I realized that the ships were attacking. Something whizzed past me, just above my head. It felt like a one-man glider. These ingenious devices were far more manageable than parachutes in landing troops. It seemed there was a raid on and we had become caught in the middle of it.

Greaves and his lads decided not to vary from their plan. 'We'll use the confusion,' he said.

Birchington called: 'I say, steady on. Perhaps we should wait and see what—'

'No time!' shouted Greaves. 'We don't know what this is all about. Let's get to that boat.'

'But suppose—'

'Shut up, Birchington,' I said. I was prepared to follow Greaves' lead. I felt I had little choice now.

'Wait!' cried the engineer. 'Let's just stop and think for a minute. If we keep our heads—'

'You're about to lose yours to a samurai sword,' called Greaves. 'Now for God's sake shut up, Birchington. Either stay where you are or come with us quietly.'

'Quietly? I wonder what you mean to say when you say—'

His droning voice was a greater source of fear than any bombs or bullets. We all put on an excellent burst of speed. By now machine-guns were going, both from the ground and from the rear. I have never prayed before for another human being's death, but I prayed that night that somebody would take Birchington directly between the eyes and save us.

The Japanese were all making for the camp. As a result we were lucky. They weren't looking for escaped prisoners just yet. Even when we were spotted, we were taken for enemy soldiers. We were shot at, but we were not pursued.

We reached the outskirts of the town. Getting through the streets unobserved was going to be the difficult part.

Again we were lucky in that whatever was going on behind us was diverting all troops, all attention. It was Birchington crying: 'I say, you fellows, wait for me!' that brought us the greatest danger. A small detachment of Japanese infantry heard his voice and immediately began to fire along the alley we had entered. Greaves went down, together with a couple of others.

I kneeled beside Greaves. I tested his pulse. He had been shot in the back of the head and was quite dead. Another chap was dead, also, but the survivor was only slightly wounded. He got his arm over my shoulder and we continued to make for the harbor. By this time we were fairly hysterical and were yelling wildly at Birchington as Japanese soldiers opened fire again behind us. 'Shut up, you damned fool! Greaves is dead!'

'Dead? He should have been more careful . . .'

'Shut up, Birchington!'

We got to the quayside and went straight into the water, as planned, swimming for the nearest boat, a white and red blur in the misty electric light from the harbor. I heard Birchington behind me.

'I say, you chaps. I say! Didn't your realize I couldn't swim?'

This intelligence seemed to lend me greater energy. Supporting the wounded man, I swam slowly towards the MTB. Some of the seamen were already climbing its sides. I was relieved to hear no further gunshots. Perhaps we had managed to surprise them, after all.

By the time I eventually got to the MTB a rope ladder had been thrown down for me. I lifted the wounded man on to it, holding it while he ascended. I think I could still hear Birchington's dreadful cries from the harbor:

'I say, chaps. Hang on a minute. Can somebody send a boat to fetch me?'

I hardened my heart. At that moment I must admit I didn't give a fig for Birchington's life.

By the time I reached the deck I was gasping with exhaustion. I looked around me, expecting to see captured Japanese sailors. Instead I saw the white uniforms of Russian Navy personnel. A young lieutenant, his cap on the side of his head, his tunic unbuttoned, a revolver and a saber in his hands, saluted me with his sword. 'Welcome aboard, sir,' he said in perfect English. He grinned at me with that wild, careless grin which only Russians have. 'We both appear to have had the same idea,' he said. 'I am Lieutenant Pyatnitski, at your service. We took this boat only twenty minutes before you arrived.'

'And the airships back there?'

'Russian. We are rescuing the prisoners, I hope, at this very moment.'

'You're using an awful lot of stuff for a few prisoners,' I said.

'While the prisoners are on the island,' said Pyatnitski pragmatically, 'we cannot bomb the fuelling station.'

One of the English seamen said. 'Poor bloody Greaves. He died for absolutely nothing.'

I leaned on the rail. From the quayside I could still hear Birchington's awful voice, pleading and desperate: the wailing of a frightened child.

## **2.** ***Back in Service***

If someone had told me, before I ever entered the Temple of Teku Benga, that I should one day be glad to join the Russian Service, I should not only have laughed at them I should, if they had persisted, probably have punched them on the nose. In those days Russia was the greatest menace to our frontiers in India. There was often the threat of open war, for it was. Well-known that they had territorial ambitions in Afghanistan, if nowhere else. The fact that the Japanese Empire and the Russian Empire had clashed over which parts of South-East Asia and China came under their control was probably fortunate for the British. The War might well have taken a different turn, with Japan and Britain as allies, if Russian ambitions had not, in this world, been diverted towards the crumbling remains of the Chinese Empire. A great deal of the reason for this, of course; was Kerensky himself.

The old President of Russia (and the chief power in the so-called Union of Slavic Republics -fundamentally the countries conquered by Imperial Russia before the socialist Revolution) was anxious to keep the friendship of Europe and America and this meant that he had become extremely cautious about offending us. Russia needed to import a great many manufactured goods even now, and she needed markets for her agricultural produce. Moreover she required as much foreign investment as she could get and was especially interested in attracting" British and American capital. She had taken huge steps forward since the successful - and almost bloodless - Revolution of 1905, which had occurred at a time when another war between Russia and Japan was brewing. Her brand of humanist

socialism had produced almost universal literacy and her medical facilities were amongst the best in the world. She had produced a thriving and liberal middle class and it was very rare, these days, to encounter the kind of poverty for which Russia, when I was a boy, was famous. And in all, even amongst the most conservative people, there was no doubt that Russia and her dominions were much improved for Kerensky and his socialists.

Whatever the historical reasons, there was nothing dishonorable in joining the Russians against our common enemy. When the submarine liner, took us, first to Vladivostok and then, by airship, to Khabarovsk, I wondered how long it would be before I could begin doing something again. The imprisonment alone had left me frustrated. When news came through that any British citizens with airship experience were needed for the aerial arm of the Russian Volunteer Fleet and that

Whitehall was actively encouraging us to join up, I put my name down immediately, and as did most of the chaps I was with. Those few of us, like myself, with military experience were given the choice of serving on armed merchantmen, flying in convoys, or on the escorting aerial frigates and cruisers themselves. I elected to join the frigates. I had no particular urge to kill my fellow men but something in me felt it wanted to take something less than a passive role through the rest of this particular War. I have learned from my experiences that the politicians of any one country against any other can manufacture hatred and racial antagonism, so I was no longer the patriot I had been. Personally, however, and I know now that this was an infantile impulse, I felt that I had been put to a great deal of trouble by the Japanese and I might as well fight them as anyone else. I also, I must admit, rather hoped there would not be too much conflict. I wanted to fly good, fast ships. And here, at last, was my chance.



We had a two-week training program in and around Samara, in which we learned the specifics of the Russian ships, which were mainly built and equipped according to the designs of the great engineer Sikorski and at that time were amongst the most modern in the world; then we were assigned to various ships to get general experience. I joined the aerial cruiser *Vassarion Belinsky*. She was a fine, easily handled ship, sailing out of the great Lermontov Airpark a few miles to the north of Odessa, that marvelous cosmopolitan seaport from which have come so many fine Russian-speaking poets, novelists, painters, and intellectuals. I had a few days' leave in Odessa before we sailed and I enjoyed those days to the full. Being on the Black Sea the port was relatively untouched by the War and there was more merchant shipping in her harbors than there was naval. Her streets were crowded with people of every color and nation. She smelled of spices, of the food of the five continents, and there was a merry, carefree quality about her, even in wartime, which seemed to me to exemplify the very best of the Slavic soul.

Odessa has a large Jewish population (for it is the capital of Russian Jewry beyond the pale, even though the pale itself, together with all anti-Semitic laws, has been abolished in Kerensky's Russia) and so is full of music, intelligent commercial enterprise, and romance. I fell in love with her immediately. I know of no other city quite like her and often wish that I could have spent longer exploring her winding streets, her avenues and promenades, her resorts and watering places. She is not strictly speaking a Russian city. She is Ukrainian, and the Ukrainians will insist that the 'goat-beards' (their word for great Russians) are interlopers, that Kiev, capital of the Ukraine, is the true center of Slavic culture, that the Muscovites are upstarts, parvenus, johnny-come-latelies, tyrants, imperialists, thieves, carpet-baggers, and almost anything else of the kind you care to think of. It is true that the Central Government of Moscow has most

power over the Ukraine, but there is a spirit about Odessa, which, I think, denies any of its denizens' allegations.

In Odessa I learned a great deal about the progress of the war. On land the Japanese had made many early gains, but were now being beaten back by Russian and British infantry – indeed they had held less territory than before the war. They were still pretty powerful in the air and at sea, and were masters of strategy, but all in all we were optimistic about the way the conflict was turning, for the Dutch and Portuguese were also on our side and although their navies were not large, they were extremely capable.

It is certain that the War would have been as good as over if it had not been for Russia's domestic problems. These tended, amongst Odessa's population, to be a more important topic than the War itself. Perhaps because of the War, there was a threat of revolution in several parts of the USSR. Indeed whole parts of the Ukraine were currently in the hands of large armies calling themselves Free Cossacks – many of them deserters from various cavalry regiments. I gathered that they were intense Slavophiles, opposed to Kerensky's 'Europeanisation' of their lands, were 'nationalists' in that they argued for the independence of all territories currently making up the Russian Empire – Bohemia, Moravia, Poland, Finland, Latvia, Estonia, Bulgaria and so on. Their policies and demands seemed vague, though socialistic in terminology, even when I heard them discussed from all aspects, but if it was possible to argue forever about the interpretation of their ideology, all agreed to a degree of fascination with the leading personality amongst the revolutionists, the mysterious man known popularly as The Steel Tsar. He was believed to have come originally from Georgia and his real name was thought to be Josef" Vissarionovich Djugashvili, an ex-priest with a record of messianism. He was known as the Steel Tsar because he tended to wear an ancient metal helmet covering most of his face. There were many explanations of this; some thought

him disfigured in battle, others thought that his features had been hideously deformed since birth. He was supposed to have a withered arm, be a hunchback, have artificial legs, and to be not a human being at all, but some sort of automaton.

Because of the atmosphere surrounding Djugashvili, I myself became quite as curious about him as the natives. I followed the news of the Free Cossacks as eagerly as I followed news of the British airship battles in the skies of the Pacific.

In Odessa I met one of the chaps with whom I had been imprisoned. He was about to join a British merchantman. He told me that Birchington, too, was working for the Russians, but he wasn't sure where. 'Some sort of engineering job, I gather.' Olmeijer was in Yalta, managing a State-owned hotel.

The worst news, however, concerned Dempsey. 'I heard he jumped it before we ever got to Japan. Seemed so scared of what they'd do to him that, wounded as he was, he preferred to dive out. God knows why they hated him so. Do you have any idea, Bastable?'

I shook my head. But again I experienced that peculiar frisson; a sort of recognition, as if somewhere within me I actually *knew* what Dempsey had done.

My experience of Odessa was as intense as it was brief and I missed it, when I left for the airpark on the train, as if I had lived there for years.

The *Vassarion Belinsky* was a joy. She used liquid ballast, which could, like her gas, be heated or cooled to alter her weight, and her ascent acceleration was, if we needed it, rocket-like in its speed. She had a top-speed of 200 mph but could be pushed quite a bit faster than that with a good wind behind her. She could turn and dive like a porpoise and there was almost nothing you couldn't do with her.

All the crew, except me, was Russian. Captain L. V. Leonov was a thoroughly experienced airshipman with an

excellent grasp of English. My own Russian was, naturally, limited, but enough to receive and convey the appropriate orders. England had for many years maintained herself as successfully in the air as she had on the sea, so that most airshipmen tended to use English as their first language while aloft.

As we left Lermontov Airpark on a cool, sunny dawn, gaining height through a slow, gentle curve which revealed more and more of the steppe through our observation ports, Captain Leonov broke open his orders on the control deck and, standing with his back to our helmsman, informed his officers of the *Belinsky's* mission.

I was not the only one both surprised and disappointed. It seemed that we were victims of a typical piece of Muscovite bureaucratic muddle, and there I was (since I had signed up for a minimum of a year) with absolutely nothing I could do about it.

Leonov's heavy Russian face was sober and his voice sonorous as he began to read the orders. With typical Russian courtesy, he spoke English for my benefit.

'We are to proceed at all fastest speed to Yekaterinaslav which is currently sustaining heavy attack from rebel forces. We are to join other ships under the command of Air Admiral Krassnov.' He pinched his eyebrows together. It was obvious that he had no taste for the commission, which would involve him in giving orders, which would inevitably lead to the death of other Russians.

Everyone was agitated by the news. They had been expecting to defend their country against the Japanese. Instead they were assigned to domestic policing duties of a kind which all the officers found distasteful and demeaning. I did not really mind missing a scrap with the Japanese, but I was bitterly sorry that I was unlikely to see any real aerial action. I had joined the Service out of a mixture of desperation and boredom. I appeared to be doomed to a continuation of those circumstances.

Moreover I should sooner or later have blood on my hands, and it would be the blood of people I had absolutely nothing against. I had no idea of the issues. Socialists are always quarrelling amongst themselves, because of the strong element of messianism in their creeds, and I could see little difference between Kerensky's brand or Djugashvili's. My only consolation was that at least I might have the opportunity of observing the Steel Tsar (or at any rate his works) at first hand.

Pilniak, a 2nd Lieutenant of about my own age, with huge brown eyes and a rather girlish face (though he was in no way effeminate) grasped my uniformed shoulder (like him I wore the pale blue of the Russian Volunteer Air force) and laughed.

'Well, Mr. Bastable, you're going to see some Cossacks, eh? A bit of the reality most Europeans miss.' He dropped his voice and became sympathetic. 'Does that bother you? The Steel Tsar rather than the Mikado?' 'Not a bit,' I said. After all, I thought wickedly, I had originally been trained to fight Russians. But I have never been able to find consolation in cynicism for long and this lasted a few seconds. 'Perhaps we'll find out if he's human or not.'

Pilniak became serious. 'He's human. And he's cruel. This whole thing is essentially mediaeval in its overtones, for all they claim to be socialists and nationalists. They want to put the clock back to the days of Ivan the Terrible. They could destroy Russia and everything the Revolution achieved. There have even been instances of pogroms in one or two of the towns they've taken, and God alone knows what's going on in the rural districts. They should be stopped as quickly as possible. But they're gaining popular support all the time. War brings out these basic feelings. They are not always controllable. Our newspapers beat the drum of Slavophilia, of nationalism, in an effort to stir up patriotic feeling against the Japanese - and this happens.'

'You seem to speak as if this uprising was inevitable.'

'I think it was. Kerensky promised us Heaven on Earth many years ago. And now we find that not only have we not made Heaven, but also we are threatened with Hell, in the form of invasion. This War will leave many scars, Mr. Bastable. Our country will not be the same when it is over.'

'The Steel Tsar is a genuine threat?'

'What he represents, Mr. Bastable, is a genuine threat.'

### **3.**

## ***Cossack Revolutionists***

Yekaterinaslav was soon below us and it was obvious that the city was undergoing attack. We could see smoke and flames everywhere, little groups of figures running hither and yonder in the suburbs, the occasional boom of cannon fire or the tiny snapping noises of rifle-shots.

Yekaterinaslav was an old Russian-style city, with many of its buildings made of wood. Tall houses with elaborately carved decoration; the familiar onion-domes of churches; spires, steeples, several brick-built apartment blocks and shops near the center.

On the nearby DnieperRiver most of the boats were burning or had been sunk. Occasionally a ship, its paddles foaming the water, would go by the city, and sometimes it would loose off a shell or two. Evidently these were naval ships commandeered by the revolutionists.

Pilniak knew Yekaterinaslav pretty well. He stood beside me, naming streets and squares. Some distance from the city, amongst demolished farmhouses and ruined fields, we saw the main Cossack camp: a mixture of all kinds of tents and temporary shacks, including more than one railway carriage, for the main railway line ran to Yekaterinaslav and much of its stock had been captured.

'That's it,' said Pilniak in some excitement. 'The Free Cossack Host. Impressive, you must admit.' He raised binoculars to his eyes. 'Most of their heavy artillery is further down the line, along with their armored vehicles. They're saving up the cavalry for the final charge. There must be ten thousand horses down there.'

'Not much good against airships,' I said. 'They look a pretty unruly mob to me.'

'Wait until you see them fight. Then you'll know what cavalry tactics are all about.'

As a matter of fact it did my heart good to hear someone talking in those terms. The last time I had heard people discussing cavalry tactics had been in the mess in my own world of 1902.

'You talk as if you're on their side,' I said.

He paused, lowering his glasses, then he said seriously: 'everything free in the Russian heart is represented by our Cossacks. Every yearning we have is symbolized by their way of life. They are cruel, they are often illiterate and they are certainly unsophisticated by Petersburg standards, but they are - they are the Cossacks. The Central Government should never have imposed conscription. They would have volunteered in time, but they wanted to show that they were making their own decisions, not Petersburg's.'

'This rebellion came about as the result of conscription?' I had not heard this mentioned in Odessa.

'It is one reason. There are many. Traditionally, the Cossacks have enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy. When the Tsars tried to take it away they always found themselves in trouble. They have large communities - we call them Hosts -which elect their own officers, their own leader - the *ataman* - and are very touchy, Mr. Bastable, about these things.'

'Apparently,' I said. 'So in destroying this rebellion, you feel you are in some way destroying your own sense of freedom, of romance.'

'I think so,' said Pilniak. He shrugged. 'But we have our orders, huh?'

I sighed. I did not envy him his dilemma.

The Cossacks had sighted the ship. There was some sporadic artillery fire from the ground, a few rifle shots, but luckily they had little or no anti-aircraft weaponry. The poor devils would be sitting ducks for our bombs.



The ship was turning slowly, heading for the airpark on the southern side of the city. Here we were to rendezvous with the other ships of the Volunteer Fleet.

Pilniak continued to peer through his binoculars. 'Looks as if they're missing,' he said. 'They know they haven't much time now.'

'They're going to try to take the city entirely with cavalry?'

'It's not the first time they've done it. But they have covering fire to some extent, and some armored battle cars.'

'Who's defending Yekaterinaslav?' I asked.

'I think we dropped some infantry a couple of days ago, and there's some artillery, too, as you can see. They were only sent to hold out until we arrived, if I'm not mistaken.'

Now we could see the airpark. There were already half-a-dozen good-sized ships tethered at mast. 'Those are troop-carriers,' he said, pointing to the largest. 'By the way they're sitting in the air I'd say they still had most of their chaps on board.'

Even as he spoke the captain came on deck behind us and saluted us. 'Gentlemen, we have our wireless orders.'

We approached him. He was mopping his brow with a large, brown handkerchief. He seemed to be barely in control of his own agitation. 'We are to proceed in squadron with three other ships, led by the *Afanasi Turchaninov*, and there we shall release our bombs on the rebel camp before they can move their horses out.' He was plainly sickened by the statement. Whatever the Cossacks had done, however cruel they were, however insane in their ambitions, they did not deserve to die in such a manner.

His announcement was greeted with silence throughout the control deck.

The captain cleared his throat. 'Gentlemen, we are at War. Those soldiers down there are just as much enemies of Russia as the Japanese. They could be said to be a worse

enemy, for they are traitors, turning against their country in her hour of greatest need.'

He spoke with no real authority. It would not have mattered a great deal if the horsemen were Japanese, it still seemed appallingly unsporting to do what we were about to do. I felt that Fate had once again trapped me in a moral situation over which I had no control.

Some of my fellow officers were beginning to murmur and scowl. Pilniak saluted. Captain Leonov. 'Sir, are we to place bombs directly on the Cossacks?'

'Those are our orders.'

'Could we not simply bomb around them, sir?' said another young officer. 'Give them a fright.'

Those are not our orders, Kostomarov.'

'But sir, we are airshipmen. We . . .'

'We are servants of the State,' insisted the captain, 'and the State demands we bomb the Cossacks.' He turned his back on us. 'Drop to two hundred feet, height coxswain.'

'Two hundred feet, sir.'

The grumbling continued until the captain whirled round, his face red with anger. 'To your posts, gentlemen. Bombardiers: look to your levers.'

Grimly we did as we were instructed. From the masts, which were now behind us, there floated up three other ships. Two positioned themselves on our port and starboard, while the leader went ahead of us. There was a funereal atmosphere about the whole operation. As he gave his orders, the captain's voice was low and bleak.

The wireless began to buzz. Our operator lifted his instrument. 'It is the flagship, sir,' he told the captain. The captain came to the equipment and began to listen. He nodded once or twice and then gave fresh orders to the helmsman. He seemed almost cheerful. 'Gentlemen,' he said, 'the Cossacks are already charging. Our job will now be to try to break them up.'

The task was hardly congenial, but anything had begun to seem better than bombing a camp. At least it would be a moving target.

## 4. ***The Black Ships***

I very much doubt, Moorcock, that you will ever know the experience of confronting a Cossack battle-charge, or, indeed, that you will ever witness it from the control deck of a sophisticated aerial cruiser!

Led by Admiral Krassnov's flagship, we raced lower and lower to the ground, to give specific accuracy to our aerial torpedoes. As we approached we were barely fifty feet up and *ahead* of us was a mountain of black dust in which were silhouetted the massed forms of men and horses. This, at least, felt more like a fair fight.

Standing on the bridge, peering forward, Captain Leonov issued the command:

'Let go Volley Number One.'

Levers were depressed and, from their tubes in the bow of the gondola, aerial torpedoes buzzed towards the yelling Cossack Host. The torpedoes made a high-pitched noise as their stubby wings sliced the air and then a deep-throated *boom* sounded as they entered the Cossack ranks. Yet for all they were inevitably deadly the torpedoes hardly seemed to make a scrap of difference to the momentum of the charge.

Next, as the riders passed below us, we released our bombs, lifting to about a hundred and fifty feet as we did so and then dipping down again to fire off another volley of torpedoes. The ship creaked to the helmsman's rapid turning and returning of the wheel, to the height coxswain's sure hand on his valve-controls. I've never flown in a tighter ship and as we do our bloody work I prayed for the chance of a real engagement with ships of equal maneuverability.

The Cossacks split ranks as we came down on them again and at first it seemed they were in panic. Then I realized

they were tactical breaks to move out of our direct line of fire. They showed enormously disciplined horsemanship. Now I understood what Pilniak had been talking about. And, admiring such courage and skill, I felt even less pleased with myself for what I was involved in.

On a wireless order from the flagship we released the last of our bombs and went rapidly aloft. Now we could see the results of our attack. Dead and dying men and horses were strewn everywhere. The ground was pitted with craters, scattered with red flesh and broken bones. It was sickening.

Pilniak had tears in his eyes. 'I blame that *staretz* for this - the mad priest Djugashvili. He's not a socialist. He's a lunatic nihilist, throwing away those poor lads' lives!'

It's common enough to transfer one's own guilt onto an easy villain, but I was bound to agree with him about the so-called Steel Tsar.

Not for the first time, however, I wished that the airship had never been conceived. Its capacity for destruction was horrifying.

On the bridge Captain Leonov was pale and silent. He gave his orders in quiet, tense Russian.

Whenever my eyes met those of one of my fellow airshipmen it seemed we shared the same thoughts. This could be the beginning of Civil War. There is no kind more distressing, no kind, which so rapidly describes the pointlessness of human killing human. I have been fated, for a reason I cannot comprehend or for no reason at all, to witness the worst examples of insane warfare (and all warfare, it seems to me now, is that) and having to listen to the most ridiculous explanations as to its 'necessity' from otherwise perfectly rational people, I have long since become weary, Moorcock, of the debate. If I appear to you to be in a more reconciled mood than when your grandfather first met me it is because I have learned that no individual is responsible for War - that we are all, at the same time, individually responsible for the ills of the human condition.

In learning this - and I am about to tell you how I learned it - I learned a certain tolerance for myself and for others which I had never previously possessed.

We had not managed to halt the Cossack charge, even though we had weakened it. As we returned to the airpark I saw the second stage of our strategy. On the outskirts of the city the larger troop carriers were releasing their 'cargo'.

Each soldier fell from the great gondolas on his own thin wings.

In rough formation, the airborne infantry began to glide towards the earth, guiding themselves on pairs of silken sails to the ground where they reformed, folded their wings into their packs and marched towards the trenches already prepared for them. Next, on large parachutes, artillery pieces were landed and moved efficiently to their positions. As the Cossack Host approached the suburbs, it was met by a sudden burst of fire. I heard rifles and machine-guns, the boom of howitzers and field guns.

Pilniak said to me: 'I wish I was down there with them.'

I merely wished that I were nowhere near Yekaterinaslav. 'Does the Steel Tsar lead his own charges?' I asked. Perhaps I was hoping that the man had at least died for his folly.

'They say he does.' Pilniak grimaced. 'But who can be sure? He's quite an old man, I gather.'

'I wonder how a Georgian priest became a Cossack *ataman*?' I said. 'Doesn't that seem strange to you?'

'He's been in this part of the world for years. A Cossack is a *kind* of person, not a member of a race, as such. They elect their leaders, as I told you. He must have courage and he must have a powerful personality. Also, I suspect, he has the knack of appealing to people's pride. The Central Government has humiliated the Cossacks who know that if they had not supported the Revolution it would have collapsed.

The Revolution started where our old uprisings always used to start, here in the South, on the "borderlands" (that is

what Ukraine means). It could have degenerated into pogroms and civil slaughter, but the Cossacks had been mistreated by the Tsar, used badly in the War against Japan, so they sided with the socialists and helped establish the first effective parliament, our Duma, which in turn caused Tsar Nicholas to abdicate. It was Cossacks who seated Kerensky in the Presidential Chair. It was Cossacks who put his picture in place of the Tsar's.'

'You and your icons—' I began, but Pilniak was in full, impassioned stride.

'Naturally the Cossacks feel humiliated by Kerensky. They gave him the power in return for their own autonomy. They see him as betraying them, as attacking their freedoms. On that day in October 1905 when he stood before the Duma and the representatives of all the Cossack Hosts, he spoke of "eternal liberty" for the Cossacks. Now he appears to be making exactly the same mistakes Tsar Nicholas made - and is paying the price.'

'You seem confused in your loyalties,' I said.

'I'm loyal to our socialist ideals. Kerensky is old. Perhaps he takes poor advice, I don't know.'

I looked back at the carnage, astonished that those wild, atavistic horsemen could have so much influence on the course of modern history. If it was true that they had only demanded their own freedom, rather than political power as such, then it was not surprising that they felt betrayed by those they had supported. There were many peoples who had shared their experience throughout history.

'Djugashvili promises them their old liberties back,', said Pilniak bitterly, 'and the only freedom he actually brings is the freedom of death. He's still a peasant priest at heart. They curse Russia. They have something which the Russian people find hard to resist.'

'Hope?' I said dryly.

'Once, yes. But now? Our country has almost universal literacy, a free medical service which is the envy of the

world, our living standards are higher than most. We are prosperous. Why should they need a *staretz*?'

'They expected Heaven. You said so yourself. Your Socialist Duma appears to have provided them only with Earth - a familiar reality, however improved.'

Pilniak nodded. 'We Slavs have always hoped for more. But until Kerensky we achieved far less. What could the Steel Tsar do for us?'

'Remove personal responsibility,' I said.

Pilniak laughed. 'We have never been fond of that. You Anglo-Saxons have the lion's share, eh?'

I failed to take his point. Seeing this, Pilniak added kindly: 'we are still ruled, in some ways, by our Church. We are a people more cursed by religion and its manifestations and assumptions than any other. The Steel Tsar, with his messianic socialism, offers us religion again, perhaps. You English have never had quite the same need for God. We have known despair and conquest too often to ignore Him altogether.' He shrugged. 'Old habits, Mr. Bastable. Religion is the panacea for defeat. We have a great tendency to rationalize our despair in mystical and Utopian terms.'

I began to understand him. 'And your Cossacks are prepared to kill to achieve that dream, rather than accept Kerensky's philosophy of compromise?'

'They are, to be fair, also prepared to die for the dream,' he said. 'They are children. They are Old Believers, in that sense. Not long ago, all Russians were children. If Djughashvili has his way, they'll become children again. Kerensky's mistake has always been that he has refused to become a patriarch -or, as you said, an icon.' He smiled. 'Though he's come close in his time. Petersburg socialism seems cold to the likes of our Cossacks, who would rather worship personalities than embrace ideas.'

I shared his irony. 'You make them sound like Americans.'

'We all have it in us, Mr. Bastable, particularly in times of stress.'



The cruisers were nearing the masts now and making ready to anchor. Captain Leonov reminded us of our duties and we returned to our posts on the bridge.

We were never to dock.

As the sun began to sink over the steppe, filling the landscape with that soft Russian twilight, Pilniak pointed with alarm to the East.

'Ships, sir!' he shouted to the captain. 'About ten of them!'

They were moving in rapidly - medium-sized warships, black from crown to gondola, without insignia or markings of any kind, and as they flew they fired.

We had only our light guns and no bombs or torpedoes left. Before attacking us, these ships had evidently waited until we had spent our main firepower.

One of the other cruisers received a terrific bombardment, so heavy that it was knocked sideways in the air the moment before its mooring cables linked with the mast. It made an attempt to come up, nose-first, but explosive shells struck hull and gondola with enormous force. One or two of its guns went off and were answered by an even fiercer barrage. They must have hit fuel supplies, for fire burst out in the starboard stern of her gondola. She was holed, too, and jerking like a harpooned whale as she dropped towards the buildings of the airpark, fell against a mast, scraped down it and collapsed uselessly on the ground. Ground crew ran rapidly towards her, preparing to fight the fire and save her complement if they could.

Hastily Captain Leonov ordered our gunners to their various positions about the gondola.

'Whose ships are they?' I shouted to Pilniak.

He shook his head. 'I don't know, but they're evidently not Japanese. They're fighting for the Cossacks.'

Captain Leonov was at the wireless equipment, conferring with Krassnov's flagship, which, we could see, was receiving a heavy bombardment. The black ships appeared to single

out one of our vessels at a time. He spoke rapidly in Russian. 'Da -da -ya panimayu...' Then: 'Two thousand feet, height coxswain. Full speed, minimum margin.' This means we were going to have to hang on to our heads and stomachs as the ship began to shoot upwards.

We clung to the handrails. As we climbed we also turned to bring our larger recoilless thirty-pounders to bear on the black ships below. It was a beautiful piece of airmanship and it was rewarded almost immediately as we scored two good hits on one of the leading enemy craft. Though my head was swimming, I was elated. This was what I had joined the Service for!

Two enemy ships split away from the fleet and began to come up towards us, but without the speed, the efficiency or the sheer skill of the *Vassarion Belinsky*. We had little else, at that point, but our superior airmanship, for we were outgunned and outnumbered. We continued to rise, but at a slower rate, still firing down on the two black ships which swam upwards, implacable and deadly, like sharks moving in for the kill.

We reached the clouds.

'Forward at half-speed,' Captain Leonov instructed the helmsman. He was very calm now and there was a peculiar little smile on his face. Evidently he preferred this kind of fighting, no matter how dangerous, to the sort we had first been forced to take part in.

'Cut engines,' ordered the captain. We were now drifting, partially hidden by the clouds, inaudible to our enemies.

'Are we going to engage them, sir?' Pilniak wanted to know.

Leonov pursed his lips. 'I think we might have to, Lieutenant Pilniak. But I want to get us as much advantage as possible. Turn the main vanes two points to port, helmsman.'

The ship began to come about slowly.

'Another two points,' said the captain. His eyes were cold and hard as he peered into the cloud.

'Another point.' We had almost made a complete turn.

'Engines active!' said Leonov. 'Full speed ahead.'

Our diesels shrieked into life as we plunged into the open sky again. It was a gray limbo, with clouds below us and the darkening heavens above. We might well find ourselves fighting at night, using our searchlights to seek out antagonists. It would be a game of hide-and-seek, which could last until dawn or even longer. Captain Leonov was plainly preparing for this, attempting to buy time. By now our surviving sister ships would have attempted the same tactics. We had little choice, for we were all but helpless in any kind of direct engagement.

'Cut engines.' Again we were drifting, waiting for a sight of the black ships. A wind was striking our outer cables, making them sing. Stars had begun to appear overhead.

Pilniak shivered. 'It's as if the world's ceased to exist,' he murmured.

Then we spotted them, below and about half-a-mile ahead.

They had seen us, as well, and were coming up rapidly.

'Engines! Full!'

Again our diesels screamed.

'Three points starboard, hard, helmsman.'

We swung so that we faced the black ships side-on.

'Fire all guns!'

We offered them a broadside, which was, in my view, a masterpiece of gunnery, sending a stream of shells in a vector towards both ships, which were sailing virtually side-by-side.

We hit one badly, evidently damaging its engines, because it began to turn in the wind, virtually out of control. We had no explosive shells and the enemy hulls could resist everything but a close-range total hit from our guns, so we

were concentrating on their engines and their control-vanes. It was the best we could do.

The second ship began to go to cover in the lower clouds and now we could see that it was in wireless-telephone contact with its companions, for as the wounded ship withdrew, two more started to ascend. We could see nothing of our own sister-ships and had to assume that they had taken evasive action or had been brought down.

The gondola shook violently and I nearly lost my footing as our hull received at least one direct hit.

'Rapid descent, height coxswain,' ordered our captain.

We fell through the skies like a stone until we were actually below the enemy craft, slowing, it seemed to me, just before we struck the ground.

'Full speed astern.'

We raced backwards over a deserted steppe. The city and the Cossacks were nowhere to be seen. Captain Leonov had chosen his own area of battle.

The black ships were in hot pursuit, attempting to imitate our tactics.

One of the ships did not pull up in time. She hit the ground with a massive thump. Her gondola and all aboard her must have been smashed to fragments. She began to bump upwards again and we could see that she had left a great deal of debris behind. She was nothing but a drifting hulk.

Leonov seized his chance. 'We'll use her for cover. Get behind her if you can, helmsman. Forward, half-speed. One point to port.'

Just as we swam in beside the ruined ship, her companion's guns began to go off. They hit the hulk and shells burst all over her, but we received only minor concussion. We moved up over her, all our cannon going at once and again we managed to damage vanes and engines on the nearest warship.

It was getting dark. Searchlights suddenly came on, blinding us as we stood on the bridge. Captain Leonov gave the order to switch on our own electrics. It would make us visible to the enemy, but at least we would not be entirely blinded.

'Give them another broadside,' said Captain Leonov quietly.

Our guns sought the source of the searchlights and we saw the last black ship begin to retreat upwards, perhaps trying to lure us into pursuit.

Captain Leonov smiled a grim, experienced smile and shook his head. 'Half-speed ascent, engines slow astern.'

We climbed away from our enemy, into the clouds again. Our captain's superb tactics mightily impressed me.

Pilniak was elated, in spite of himself. 'That's showing them what real air fighting's all about,' he said. He clapped me on the shoulder. 'What do you think, Mr. Bastable?'

I was not naturally capable of the same display of emotion as the Russian, but I turned, grinning, and shook him by the hand. 'I've never seen anything like it,' I said.

The black ship had extinguished her searchlights and had vanished.

'We must wait until morning now, I think,' said Captain Leonov. 'Thank you, gentlemen. You are an excellent crew.'

The half-moon was now visible, seemingly huge in the sky. Again the captain gave the order to stop all engines. The Russians were cheering and hugging one another, absolutely delighted by what could only be considered a victory against almost impossible odds.

It was an hour or two later, as we rested and debated the morning's moves, as our operator attempted to get wireless instructions from Yekaterinaslav and then, when that failed, from Kharkov, that the ship was suddenly shaken by an almighty thump.

At first we thought we had been hit, but the ship was moving strangely in the air and had not descended a

fraction. If anything, we had gained a little height.

We were asking ourselves what had happened when Captain Leonov came racing from his cabin, glaring upwards. It was as if he, alone, knew what had happened.

'I'd never have believed it,' he said. 'They're better than I guessed.'

'What is it, sir?' I asked.

'An old tactic, Mr. Bastable. They've been following us all along, using nothing but their steering gear to keep track of us, drifting as we've drifted.'

'But what's happened, sir?'

'Grappling clamps, Mr. Bastable. They're sitting on our crown. Their gondola to our hull. Like a huge, damned parasite.'

'We're captured?'

He grimaced. 'I think it's more in the nature of a forced marriage, Mr. Bastable.'

He shook his head, his fingers stroking his mouth. 'My fault. It's the one tactic I didn't anticipate. If they get through our inspection hatches, ' He began to issue more commands in Russian. Rifles and pistols were broken out of our tiny arsenal and a gun put into every hand. 'Everyone to the inspection hatches!' cried Pilniak. 'Prepare to repel boarders.'

I had never heard that phrase used before.

Above us the enemy ship's engines were shrilling now as we were borne forward.

'All engines full astern,' said the captain. He turned to me. 'It could rip them and us apart. But we have no choice, I fear.'

The ship began to shake as if it was undergoing a gigantic fit.

Through the quivering companionways we raced for the inspection hatches, listening carefully, through the general row, and hearing noises from inside the hull which could only be men climbing slowly down towards us. To fire

upwards into the inspection tunnels risked a gas-escape and the possibility of being incapacitated by the fumes. Fewer than half our riggers were issued with breathing equipment, for the *Vassarion Belinsky* had never expected to be captured by boarders.

'We're going to have to shoot when they emerge,' said Pilniak. 'It will be our only chance.'

I held my revolver at my side, four of five armed riggers with rifles stood immediately behind me in the narrow passage as the ship shuddered and wailed in her efforts to free herself from our captors.

Pilniak said: 'it was a daring move of theirs. Who could have guessed they'd try it?'

'They're as likely to destroy their own ship as they are ours,' I said.

Pilniak offered me one of his wild, Russian grins. 'Exactly,' he said.

The hatch cover had begun to open.

We readied our firearms.

## 5. ***A Question of Attitudes***

In the dim moonlight entering from the overhead ports, it was impossible to identify the figures that first broke through. In Russian, Pilniak ordered them to throw down their arms or we should open fire. Then we noticed that they were waving a piece of bed sheet on a stick. A white flag. They wished to parley.

Pilniak was disconcerted. He told the invaders to hold their position while he sent for orders. One of the riggers ran back along the passage towards the control deck.

The men in the hatches appeared to be amused and made some cryptic jokes which I failed to understand and which Pilniak, it seemed to me, refused to hear. It was pretty obvious to me, however, that none of us wanted to fight in those close confines. Few could survive.

I think Captain Leonov had realized this, for he returned with the rigger. Pilniak told him what was going on. He nodded, and then addressed the man holding the white flag.

'You know that this is an impossible situation for both of us. Is your leader amongst you?'

A small, stocky man pushed forward and gave Captain Leonov a mock military salute. 'I represent these people,' he said.

'You are the leader?'

'We have no leaders.'

'You are their spokesman, then?'

'I think so.'

'I am Captain Leonov, commander of this vessel.'

'I am Nestor Makhno, speaking for the anarchist cause.'

I was astonished. Before I could check myself, I uttered his name: 'Makhno!' It was the man with whom I had been



imprisoned in Japan. I had never expected to see him again. I had no idea that he knew anything at all about airships.

He recognized me and smiled. 'Good evening, Mr. Bastable. You are once more a prisoner, it seems.'

'You are not much less of one,' I remarked.

He smiled. It was a quiet, sardonic smile, almost gentle.

He wore an old, elaborate Cossack coat, with a great deal of green and gold frogging, an astrakhan hat pulled onto the side of his head, a peasant shirt, belted at the waist, baggy trousers and high riding boots. He looked the picture of the romantic Cossack of fiction and I had half-an-idea that he deliberately cultivated this appearance. There was even a Cossack sword at his side and one hand toyed with the butt of an automatic pistol stuck into his silver-studded belt.

'You serve the rebel Djugashvili, I take it,' said our captain. 'Are you trying to talk peace terms?'

'I've given that up,' said Makhno. 'It doesn't appear to work. You mention peace and everyone tries to shoot you or jail you. I do not, as it happens, serve anyone, save those who elect me. But we have agreed to give Djugashvili our help during this campaign. We do not support his ideology, only the spirit of the revolution, and the spirit of the true Cossack. We are anarchists. We refuse to acknowledge government or despots of any description.'

'You'd not agree the Steel Tsar was a despot?' I said.

Makhno acknowledged my remark with a short bow. 'I would agree absolutely. We believe neither in masters nor in slaves, Mr. Bastable.'

'Merely in Chaos!' said Pilniak with a sneer.

'Anarchy means "no government", not disorder.' Makhno dismissed Pilniak's remarks as those of a naive child. 'And it has nothing whatsoever to do with Djugashvili's idiotic so-called socialism. We do not support him, as I told you. We support the spirit of the uprising.'

Captain Leonov was confused by this information. 'Then how do we negotiate? What do you want?'

Makhno said: 'you are our prisoners. We want no bloodshed. We would rather have your ship in one piece.'

Captain Leonov became stern. 'I will not surrender my ship.'

'You have little choice,' said Makhno. He looked to the outer ports.

We all followed his gaze. On flexible steel ladders dangling from the black ship, armed men were clambering down towards our engine nacelles.

'In a few moments your engines will be out of action, captain.'

Even as he spoke one of our screws stopped turning. One by one the other engines stopped. From outside, in the chill wind, came the sound of cheering.

The captain put his hands in his pockets and spread his legs. 'What now?' he asked stoically.

'You will admit that you are completely in our power.'

'I will admit that you are an expert pirate.'

'Come now, captain. This is not piracy. We are at War. And we have won this particular engagement.'

'You are a bandit and you have seized a vessel representing the government of the Union of Slavic Republics. That is an act of piracy, of rebellion, of treason. We are indeed at War, Captain Makhno. You will recall the enemy, I think. It is Japan.'

'A war between authoritarian governments, not a war between peoples,' insisted Makhno. 'What sort of socialist are you, Captain?'

Leonov scowled. 'I am not a socialist at all. I am a loyal Russian.'

'Well, I am not a "loyal Russian". I am an anarchist and, as my birthplace seems important to you, a Ukrainian. We oppose all governments and in particular the Central Government of Petersburg. In the name of the people, Captain Leonov, we demand that you surrender your ship.'

Leonov was in a dreadful position. He did not wish to waste the lives of his crew and he could not, in conscience, hand over his command.

'You are a democrat, I take it?' said Makhno.

'Of course.'

'Then put it to your men,' said the anarchist simply. 'Do they wish to live or die?'

'Very well,' said Leonov, 'I will ask them.' He turned to us. 'Gentlemen? Airshipmen?'

'We'll fight,' said Pilniak. 'If they win, let them scrub our blood from the decks.'

Not one of us protested.

Makhno accepted this. Indeed, he seemed to have expected nothing else. 'I will give you a chance to debate your position,' he said. He began to move back towards the hatches. 'You cannot escape now. We are already carrying you to our headquarters. If any of you wishes to join our cause, we shall be happy to accept you as brothers.'

Captain Leonov did not order us to fire. We watched as the anarchists retreated, pulling the hatches closed behind them. It was then that I realized we had been subject to a diversion. While we had parleyed, we had not given attention to what had been going on outside the ship. I think Leonov understood this, too. It was obvious, as we returned to the control deck, that he did not hold a very good opinion of himself at that moment. As an aerial tactician he had no equal. As a negotiator he was by no means as successful. It seemed that Makhno (as I learned was his wont) had achieved checkmate without losing a single life on either side.

Helplessly, we watched the stars and the clouds go by around us as, with engines straining, the anarchist airship bore us steadily towards its base.

On the control deck, Captain Leonov was sending a wireless message through to Kharkov, attempting to receive instructions and to give some idea of our position.

Eventually, after several attempts, the operator turned to him. 'They have cut our antennae, sir. We can neither send nor receive.'

Leonov nodded. He looked at Pilniak and myself. 'Well, gentlemen, have you any suggestions?'

'Makhno has us completely in his power,' I said. 'Unless, we attempt to reach his ship through our inspection hatches, we have no way of stopping, him.'

Leonov bent his head, as if in thought. When he looked up he was in control of himself. 'I think we can all get some sleep,' he said. 'I regret that I did not anticipate this particular problem, gentlemen, and that we have no orders to cover it. I think I had better say here and now that I release you from my command.'

It was a strange, almost oriental thing to say. Again it gave me a better insight into the Russian temperament than I had a few months before. I respected Captain Leonov's attitude, however. He was a man of honor who believed that he had failed in his duty. He was not giving us *carte blanche* to act individually as we thought best.

In a sense I had been extraordinarily impressed by the exchange between Makhno and Leonov.

Both appeared, for all that they seemed to be in conflict, to have at root the same sense of duty to those they led. Once Leonov had been proven, in his own eyes, incompetent, he no longer felt that he had any right to command at all. I had the feeling that Makhno, and perhaps many of the Cossack *atamans* took the same view. Unlike so many politicians or military leaders they made no attempt to justify their mistakes, to cling to power. For them power held enormous responsibility and was merely invested in them temporarily. I was learning, I think, one or two things about the fundamental issues surrounding Russian politics - something that was not normally put into words by any side, by any observer. These issues were at once simpler and more complex than I had once supposed.

Pilniak was saluting. 'Thank you, sir,' he said. I had no choice but to salute as well. Leonov returned the salute and then went slowly back to his cabin.

A notion suddenly came into my head. 'Good God, Pilniak, he doesn't intend to shoot himself I hope.'

Pilniak watched the departing captain. 'I doubt it, Mr. Bastable. That, too, would be cowardly. He will resume command should we ask him. When there is something to command. In the meanwhile he releases us so that we may take whatever actions we think will help us best, as individuals, to survive.

We are a primitive people, Mr. Bastable, in some ways. Rather like Red Indians, eh? In a way? If our war-leaders fail us, they resign immediately, unless we insist they continue. That is true democratic socialism, isn't it?'

'I'm no politician,' I told him. 'I don't really understand the difference between one "ism" and another. I'm a simple soldier, as I've said more than once.'

I returned with Pilniak to our tiny cabin with its two bunks, one on top of each other. We slept fitfully, both of us having merely removed our jackets and trousers. By dawn we were up, taking coffee in the mess. Captain Leonov was absent.

A few minutes later, he joined us. 'You will be interested to learn,' he said, 'that we appear to have reached the bandits' camp.'

We all rushed out of the mess and up to the observation ports. The ship was dropping close to the ground. Trailing mooring ropes had been dropped from the hull. Even as we watched we saw a mass of Cossack horsemen racing towards the ropes. One by one at least half-a-dozen riders seized them.

In triumph, the Cossacks dragged our ship back to their headquarters, while Makhno's black battle cruiser let go its grapples and drifted some yards off, to fly beside us. We saw anarchists waving to us from their own gondola. I was almost

tempted to wave back. There was no mistaking Makhno's feat.

He was a very clever man, and plainly no fiery charlatan. I could make no sense of his politics, but I continued to keep a high opinion of his intelligence.

Slowly, ignominiously, the whooping Cossacks hauled our ship to the ground. These were evidently not the same men who had attacked Yekaterinaslav, but it was equally evident that they knew what we had done during the Cossack charge. I got a better look at them now. In the main they were small men, swarthy, heavily bearded, dressed in a mixture of clothing, much of it fairly ragged.

All were festooned with weapons, with bandoliers, with daggers and swords; all rode wonderfully. They were plainly rogues but were not by any means mere bandits.

Soon our keel was bumping along the ground as the ship was tied to wooden stakes set for that purpose into the ground on the outskirts of a small, one-street town, which seemed to have been taken over piecemeal by the rebels. We stood there looking out at the Cossacks while they grinned and gesticulated at us. They did not seem to be threatening our lives. They were overjoyed with the capture of a Central Government ship and seemed to bear us very little malice. I mentioned this to Pilniak.

'I agree,' he said. 'It's true they don't hate us. But that's the last thing which will stop a Cossack from killing you, if he so feels like it.'

I realized that we were in somewhat greater danger than I had originally thought. The Cossacks did not accept the usual conventions concerning a captured enemy and it was questionable now whether or not we should experience the next day's dawn.

Captain Leonov remained in his cabin. As we stared out at our captors the tension in the gondola began to grow. Overhead we could hear men climbing over our hull,

laughing and exchanging jokes with the Cossacks on the ground.

Eventually Pilniak looked at me and the other officers and he said: 'Let's get this over with, shall we?'

We all agreed.

Pilniak gave the order to lower our gangways and, as the side of the gondola opened out, we marched in good order down the steps towards the Cossacks.

We had expected everything but the cheer, which went up. The Cossacks are the first to acknowledge nerve when it is displayed as we displayed it. Perhaps Pilniak had known this.

Only Captain Leonov refused to leave the ship and we accepted his decision.

Pilniak and I were in the forefront. As we left the gangway he approached the nearest Cossack and saluted. 'Lieutenant L.I. Pilniak of the Volunteer Air fleet.'

The Cossack said something in a dialect, which defeated my imperfect Russian. He pushed his military cap back on his forehead, by way of returning the salute. Then he made his horse walk backwards, in order to clear a space for us, waving us on towards the village.

Still rather nervous of what the Cossacks might decide, on a whim, to do, we began to walk in double-file towards the rebel headquarters. Pilniak was smiling as he spoke and I returned the smile. 'Chin up, old man! Is this what the British call "showing the flag"?'

'I'm not quite sure,' I said. 'It's been a long while since I had occasion to do it.'

The Cossacks, some mounted, some on foot, were crowding in on us. They were pretty filthy and many of them were evidently drunk. I've never smelled so much vodka. Some of them appeared to have doused themselves in the stuff. They offered us catcalls and insults as we walked ' between their lines and we were almost at the first buildings

of the village when the press became so tight that we could no longer move.

It was then that one of our riggers, near the rear, must have struck out at a Cossack and a fight between the two began. Our carefully maintained front threatened to crack.

I think we probably would have been torn to pieces if, from our right, a horse-drawn machine-gun cart had not suddenly parted the ranks. One man drove the little cart while another discharged a revolver into the air, shouting to the Cossacks to desist.

The man with the revolver was Nestor Makhno.

'Back, lads,' he cried to his men. 'We've no grudge against those who misguidedly serve the State, only against the State itself.'

He smiled down at me. 'Good morning, Captain Bastable. So you decided to join us, eh?'

I made no reply to this. 'We are heading for your camp,' I said. 'We accept that we are your prisoners.'

'Where's the commander?'

'In his cabin.'

'Sulking, no doubt.' Makhno shouted something in dialect to the Cossacks and once more the ranks fell back, enabling us to continue on through the street until Makhno's cart stopped in front of a large school-house which flew the rebel flag: a yellow cross on a red field. He invited Pilniak and myself to join him and told the rest of our chaps that they could get food and rest at a nearby church.

We were reluctant to part from the crew and fellow officers, but we had little choice.

Makhno jumped from the cart and, limping slightly, escorted us into the schoolhouse. Here, in the main classroom, several Cossack chiefs awaited us. They were dressed far more extravagantly than their men, in elaborately embroidered shirts and kaftans, with a great deal of silver and gold about their persons and decorating their weapons.



The strangest sight, however, was the man who sat at the top of the classroom, where the teacher would normally be. He lounged forward on the desk, his face completely covered by a helmet, which had been forged to represent a fierce, mustachioed human face. Only the eyes were alive and these seemed to me to be both mad and malevolent. The man was not tall, but he was bulky, wearing a simple, gray moujik shirt, gray baggy trousers tucked into black boots. He had no weapons, no insignia on his costume, and one of his arms seemed thinner than the other. I knew that we must be confronting the Steel Tsar himself; the rebel leader Djughashvili.

The voice was muffled and metallic from within the helm. The English renegade, Bastable. We've heard of you.' The tones were coarse, aggressive. The man seemed to me to be both insane and drunk.

'Is it good sport, then? Killing honest Cossacks?'

'I am an officer in the Volunteer Air Service,' I told him.

The metal mask lifted to offer me a direct stare. 'What are you, then? Some sort of mercenary?'

I refused to explain my position.

He leaned back in his chair, heavy with his own sense of power. 'You joined to fight the Japs, is that it?'

'More or less,' I said.

'Well you'll be pleased to learn that the Japs are almost beaten.'

'I am pleased. I'd be glad to see an end to the War. To all wars.'

'You're a pacifist!' Djughashvili began to laugh from within the helm. It was a hideous sound. 'For a pacifist, my friend, you've a lot of blood on your hands. Two thousand of my lads died at Yekaterinaslav. But we took the city. And destroyed the air fleet you sent against us. What d'you say to that?'

'If the war with Japan is almost over,' I said, 'then your triumph will be short-lived. You must know that.'

'I know nothing of the sort.' He signaled to one of his men, who went to a side-door, opened it and called through. Moments later I saw Harry Birchington emerge. The Bore of Rishiri Camp back again as large as life.

'Hello, Bastable, old man,' he said. 'I knew there must be some decent socialists in Russia. And I've found the best.'

'You're working with these people?'

'Certainly. Very glad to put my talents at their disposal.'

The familiar self-congratulatory drone was already beginning to grate, after seconds.

'Mr. Birchington keeps our airships running,' said the Steel Tsar. 'And he's been very helpful in other areas.'

'Nice of you to say so, sir.' Birchington gave a peculiar twisted smile, half pride, and half embarrassment.

'Good morning, Mr. Bastable.' I recognized the warm, ironic voice immediately. I looked towards the door to see Mrs. Una Persson standing there. She had crossed bandoliers of bullets over her black military coat, a Smith and Wesson revolver on her hip, a fur hat pulled to one side of her face. She was as beautiful as ever, with her oval face and clear, gray eyes.

I bowed. 'Mrs. Persson.'

I had not seen her for some time, since together we had inhabited the world of the Black Attila.

Her eyes held that look of special recognition which one traveler between the planes reserves for another.

'You've come to join our army, I take it,' she said significantly.

I trusted her completely and took her hint at once. Much to Pilniak's astonishment, I nodded. 'My intention all along,' I said.

Djugashvili seemed unsurprised. 'We have many well-wishers abroad. People who know how much we have suffered under Kerensky. But what of your companion?'

Pilniak drew himself up and brought his heels together with a click. 'I should like to join my fellow prisoners,' he

said.

The Steel Tsar shrugged. The metal glinted and seemed to be reflected in his eyes. 'Very well.' He signed to one of his men. 'Dispose of him with—'

Makhno suddenly interposed. 'Dispose? What are you suggesting, comrade?'

Djugashvili waved his hand. 'We have too many mouths to feed as it is, comrade. If we let these survive—'

'They are prisoners of war, captured fairly. Send them back to Kharkov. All I wanted was their ship. Let them go!'

Pilniak looked from one to the other. He had never expected to be the subject of a moral argument between two bandits.

'I am responsible for all decisions,' said Djugashvili. 'I will choose whether—'

'I captured them.' Makhno was cold and angry. His voice dropped, but as the tone lowered it carried increased authority. 'And I will not agree to their murder!'

'It is not murder. We are sweeping up the rubbish of History.'

'You are planning to kill honest men.'

'They attack Socialism.'

'We must live by example and offer example to others,' said Makhno. 'It is the only way.'

'You are a fool!' Djugashvili rose and brought his sound hand down on the desk. 'Why feed them? Why send them back so they can fight against us again?'

'Some will fight against us - but others will understand the nature of our cause and tell their comrades.'

Makhno folded his arms across his chest. 'It is always so. If we are brutal, then it gives them a further excuse for brutality. By God, Djugashvili, these are simple enough arguments. What do you want? Blood-sacrifices? How can you claim to represent enlightenment and liberty? You have already been responsible for the slaughter of Jews, the destruction of peasant villages, the torturing of innocent

farmers. I agreed to bring my ships to you because you promised that these things were accidental, that they had stopped. They have not stopped. You are proving to me as you stand there that they will never stop.

You are a fraud, an authoritarian hypocrite!'

The voice within the helm grew louder and louder as Makhno's became quieter.

'I'll have you shot, Makhno. Your anarchist notions are a mere fantasy. People are cruel, greedy, ruthless. They must be educated to holiness. And they must be punished if they fail!' He was breathing heavily. 'It is what all Russians understand! It is what Cossacks understand.'

'You have no claim as a Cossack,' said Makhno with a faint sneer. 'I withdraw my help. I shall inform the people I represent and ask them if they wish to withdraw also.' He began to turn away.

The Steel Tsar became placatory. 'Nonsense, Makhno. We share the same cause. Send the prisoners to Kharkov if you wish. What do you think, Mrs. Persson?'

Una Persson said: 'I think it would show the Central Government that the Cossacks have mercy, that they are not bandits, that their grievances are justified. It would be a good thing to do.'

She seemed to have considerable influence over him, for he nodded and agreed with her.

Makhno did not seem completely satisfied, but he was evidently thinking of the safety of Pilniak and the rest. He drew a deep breath and inclined his head. 'I shall assume charge of the prisoners,' he said.

As he left with Makhno, Pilniak called back over his shoulder: 'I wish you luck with your new masters, Bastable.'

I only knew that my loyalty was to Mrs. Persson and that I had faith in her judgment.

When Makhno had disappeared, Djugashvili began to laugh. 'What a silly, childish business. Was it worth an argument over the lives of a few goat-beards?'

Mrs. Persson and I exchanged glances. In the meanwhile Harry Birchington echoed the Steel Tsar's laughter. Neither seemed possessed of what I should have called a natural sense of humor.

'Is it true the Japanese are almost beaten?' I asked Mrs. Persson.

'Certainly,' she said. 'A matter of days. They have already begun to talk armistice terms.'

'Then these people are doomed,' I said. 'There is no way that the Cossacks can resist the whole might of the Russian Aerial Navy.'

Birchington had heard me. 'That's where you're wrong old man,' he said. 'That's where you're very wrong indeed!'

I thought I heard Mrs. Persson sigh.

## **6.**

### ***Secret Weapons***

Later, when the Cossack chieftains had returned to their men, the Steel Tsar stretched and suggested that we all dine in the rooms upstairs. I had not had a chance to speak privately to Mrs. Persson and, indeed, had been cornered by Birchington who had told me how he had been picked up during the raid on Rishiri and 'dumped' (as he put it) in Kharkov because he had 'made the mistake' of telling people he was an engineer and they had needed engineers in the railway works at Kharkov. He had left the city soon afterwards and had been on a train, which had been captured by rebels. The rebels had brought him to Djugashvili and the revolutionist had taken a liking to him.

'He's got real imagination, old man. Unlike the imbeciles in London and Shanghai, who wouldn't give me a chance. All I needed was a bit of faith and some financial support. You wouldn't believe the inventions I've got in my brain, old man. Big ideas! Important ideas! Ideas, old man, which will shake the world! '

I found myself nodding, almost asleep.

'The Steel Tsar, old man, is giving me an enormous opportunity to build stuff for him which will help him win the revolution. And then we'll have real socialism. Everything properly managed, like a well-oiled machine. Everyone will be a happy dog. You'll see. And all it will take is Birchington. I'm the key factor, old man. I'm going to be remembered in History. The Chief says so.'

'The Chief?'

He indicated Djugashvili.

We followed the Steel Tsar upstairs. He had Mrs. Persson on his arm and was walking rather heavily, as if drunk. He

turned back to me. 'I had not realized you were friends. You will be able to help Birchington in his work, I hope.'

'Certainly he will,' said Mrs. Persson, 'won't you, Mr. Bastable?'

'Of course.' I tried to sound as enthusiastic as possible, but the prospect of even another five minutes in Birchington's company was more, at that moment, than I could contemplate.

The room above was fairly bare, but a long table had been laid with wholesome Ukrainian food, including a bowl of red borscht on every place. Djugashvili seated himself at the top of the table, with Mrs. Persson on his right and Birchington on his left. I sat next to Mrs. Persson. A few moments later Nestor Makhno stepped into the room. It was obvious that he was a reluctant guest. He had another man with him whom I recognized. I began to wonder if Mrs. Persson had not arranged all of this.

The other man was Dempsey, whom I had thought killed on his way to a Japanese prison. He was pale and thin and seemed ill. Possibly the drugs had begun to poison his system. When he saw me he gave a crooked smile and came forward, lurching a trifle, though he was not obviously drunk. 'Hello, Bastable. Very good to see you. Come along for the final battle, eh?'

'What?'

'Armageddon, Bastable. Haven't they told you?'

The Steel Tsar began to laugh that strange laugh of his. 'Nonsense. You exaggerate, Captain Dempsey. Professor Marek assures us that everything is much safer now. After all, you took part in an experiment.'

Dempsey sat down and began to stare at his borscht. He made no attempt at all to eat it. Nestor Makhno seated himself across from me. He seemed puzzled by me, perhaps surprised by the alacrity with which I had joined 'the other side'.

'It's a prisoners' reunion, eh?' he said. 'Did you know, Comrade Djugashvili, that four of the people at this table have been prisoners of the Japanese?'

'So I gather.' The Steel Tsar was opening a small plate in his helmet, to expose a mouth pitted with pockmarks.

Now I was prepared to believe the rumor that it was vanity, which caused him to wear the ferocious mask. He began to feed himself with small, careful movements.

He looked at Makhno. 'Did you deliver the prisoners to Kharkov?'

'Not personally. They are on their way.'

'In padded railway carriages lined with silk, no doubt.'

'They were sent in a cattle-train we requisitioned.' Makhno knew the Steel Tsar was baiting him. He stroked his neat moustache and kept his eyes on his plate.

'For so cunning a tactician, you are lily-livered as a warrior,' continued Djugashvili. 'It would seem to me, comrade, that there is even a chance you are weakening our endeavors.'

'We are fighting against the Central Government,' said Makhno obstinately. 'We are not fighting "for" you, comrade. I made that plain when we brought in our ships.'

'You brought your ships because you know you are not strong enough to fight alone. Your ridiculous notions of "honor" are inappropriate at 'this time.'

'Our notions are never inappropriate,' said Makhno. 'We simply refuse to rationalize murder. If we have to kill, we kill, in self-defense. And we continue to name it for what it is. We don't dress it up with fancy pseudo-scientific words.'

'The people like those words. It makes them feel secure,' said Mrs. Persson sardonically, as if to an intimate friend.

I wondered if she knew Makhno. It was even possible that he was a colleague. There was something out of the ordinary about the anarchist. Although the logic of his politics was beyond me, I was impressed by his recognition of fundamental principles, which so many idealists seem to



forget as soon as their ideals are rationalized in the language of political creeds. He carried within him a sort of self-control which did not deny passion and which, I thought, was almost wholly conscious, in contrast to Djughashvili, who relied on doctrine and masks for his authority.

Djughashvili continued to dig at Makhno.

'Your kind of individualism is an arrogant crime against society,' he said. 'But worse than that - it never succeeds.

What good is Revolution when it fails?'

Makhno rose from the table. 'It is proving impossible to enjoy my food,' he said. He bowed to the rest of us and apologized. 'I'll return to my ship.'

There was a light of triumph in the Steel Tsar's eyes, as if he had deliberately engineered Makhno's departure, goading him until he had no choice but to leave.

Makhno looked enquiringly at Dempsey, who shook his head slightly and reached for his vodka.

The anarchist left the room. Djughashvili seemed to be smiling behind his mask.

Dempsey was frowning slightly to himself as Makhno went out. Birchington began to babble about 'rational socialism' or some such thing and for once he broke a sense of tension, which nonetheless remained in the air.

A few moments later there came the sound of several pistol shots from outside. There were footfalls on the stairs, and then Makhno reappeared. His left arm was wounded. In his right hand was his revolver. He waved it at Djughashvili, but he was not threatening.

'Assassination, eh? You'll find at least two of your men shot. I know your methods, Djughashvili.' He paused, reholstering his empty pistol. 'The black ships leave their moorings tonight.'

Then he was gone.

Djughashvili had half-risen from his place, the light from the oil lamps making it seem that his metal mask constantly changed expression. The cold eyes were full of unpleasant

passion. 'We don't need him. He was attacking our cause from within. We have science on our side now. Tomorrow I intend to display Birchington's first invention to our men.'

Birchington seemed taken by surprise. 'Well, Chief, I think you might find it's not quite—'

'It will be ready in the morning,' said 'the Chief.

Dempsey had taken an interest in this aspect of the conversation, though he had hardly moved when Makhno had reappeared and made his declaration. Una Persson merely looked thoughtfully from face to face.

Djugashvili walked towards the door and called down the stairs. 'Bring the professor up.'

Mrs. Persson and Dempsey both appeared to know what was going on, but I was completely at sea.

Djugashvili waited by the door until a small man with graying hair and round spectacles arrived. He seemed almost as unhealthy as Dempsey. There seemed to be something wrong with his skin and his eyes were watering terribly, so that he dabbed at them constantly with a red handkerchief.

'Professor Marek. You already know Captain Dempsey. You have met Mr. Birchington. Una Persson? Captain Bastable?'

The professor blinked in our general direction and waved his handkerchief by way of greeting.

'Your bombs are ready, eh? And Birchington's invention is prepared.' Djugashvili was swaggering back to his place. 'Sit down, professor. Have some vodka. It's very good; Polish.'

Professor Marek rubbed at his cheek with the handkerchief. It appeared to me that some of his skin flaked away.

'What sort of bombs are these?' I asked the professor, more from politeness than anything.

'The same as I dropped on Hiroshima,' said Dempsey with sudden vehemence. 'Aren't they Professor Marek?'

'The bombs, which are supposed to have started the War?' I said in surprise.

'One bomb.' Dempsey lifted a finger. Mrs. Persson put a gentle hand on his arm. 'One bomb. Wasn't it, Mrs. Persson?'

'You shouldn't—'

'That was experimental,' said Professor Marek. 'We could not have predicted—'

Suddenly I was filled with that same frisson, that same terrifying resonance I had already experienced, to a slighter degree, in Dempsey's company. I felt that I stared into a distorting mirror, which reflected my own guilt.

In a small voice I asked the professor: 'What sort of bomb was it that you caused to be dropped on Hiroshima?'

Marek sniffed and dabbed at his eyes. He spoke almost casually. 'A nuclear fission bomb, of course,' he said.

## 7. ***A Mechanical Man***

For several hours thereafter, as I sat in stunned silence, we were forced to listen to Djughashvili's boastings and diatribes. He made us drink with him. He poured glass after glass of vodka into that little aperture which revealed his lips and he spoke of conquest. He planned to conquer Russia, the whole of the Slav world; both East and West would eventually succumb 'to the justice of World Revolution'. That revolution appeared to be little more than Djughashvili's attempts to control as much of the globe as possible. Like so many fanatics, he drew a picture of the world which was far different to the one most of us saw, at once simplified and changed into something which reflected his own needs, his own fears. We were probably bored and terrified together -all of us save Birchington, who hung on the Steel Tsar's every word, and Professor Marek, who scarcely understood anything.

Both Captain Dempsey and Mrs. Persson seemed to be waiting something out, as if they knew all this, as if they had anticipated the evening.

I kept looking across at Dempsey, who scarcely lifted his eyes from the table but continued steadily to down vodka after vodka.

'How many bombs are ready, professor?' I heard Djughashvili ask. I gave him more attention.

'Four,' said Marek. 'All of about the same strength. I have their measure now.'

'And you are able to produce more?'

'Of course. With Mr. Birchington's help. The Yekaterinaslav laboratories had everything we needed, as I told you they would.'

'We were lucky to find the stuff.'

Una Persson said: 'I thought Yekaterinaslav was retaken.'

Djugashvili dismissed this. 'So it was. But we got what we wanted. The whole attack was in order to supply Professor Marek with certain materials he needed. At Yekaterinaslav they were working along similar lines to the professor.'

I felt sick and I felt weary. I wanted to leap from my chair and beg them to stop talking so easily about those hell-bombs. I, of all people, knew what sort of effect they could have. They could destroy entire cities as if they had hardly existed. But, because of a look from Mrs. Persson, I held my peace.

Dempsey said drunkenly: 'You'd better hurry up and use 'em, Djugashvili, or the Central Government will be here to claim its materials back. There's a huge force on its way, as you know.'

'Certainly I shall use them soon. It only needs one ship, after all. That's why I could dispense with Makhno so readily. We have a ship. Your ship, Captain Bastable.'

'The *Vassarion Belinsky*?'

'That's her name, yes.'

'Captain Leonov is still aboard.'

'He was aboard. Since he refused to leave, we were forced to dispose of him. He has been liquidated.'

'You killed him?'

Djugashvili shrugged. 'If you like.'

Again it was all but impossible for me not to display my feelings, but I knew it was important to Mrs. Persson that I seemed to be in agreement with the Steel Tsar, so I held my tongue.

'You will command the *Belinsky*,' Djugashvili told me. 'You have been promoted to commander, Congratulations.'

I ignored this. Before I could speak, Dempsey was on his feet, leaning heavily upon the table. 'I demand that privilege,' he said. 'I am the more experienced airshipman.'

After all, I dropped the first bomb!' He spoke urgently. 'Bastable can help me.'

'You've developed a taste for mass-murder?' I asked in a quiet voice.

'Oh, yes.' He seemed completely mad at that moment and his eyes were merry with a demon's light. 'Oh, yes, Bastable. Quite a taste for it. Quite a taste.'

Djugashvili said: 'we must demonstrate our power to the Central Government. The first bomb will be dropped on Makhno's camp.'

'What a splendid idea,' said Mrs. Persson.

It was much later when Djugashvili decided to go to bed, having ordered us to be at headquarters the next morning. We watched him lumber from the room, all unchecked ego and ruthless power.

Dempsey had collapsed over the table. Birchington and Professor Marek were still deep in conversation about some technical point or other. Mrs. Persson asked me to give her a hand getting Dempsey back to the house we were to share. He was very drunk and mumbling to himself. When I took him under the shoulders I was surprised at how light he was. He laughed at some bitter joke he had made. He was very close to madness. I said as much to Mrs. Persson after we had put Dempsey to bed and sat together drinking coffee in the tiny parlor. It was a pleasant house. I wondered what well-to-do peasants had been killed or evicted in order to provide us with so much comparative luxury.

'Poor Dempsey is as good as mad,' she agreed. 'His judgment has been destroyed and he has managed to keep himself going on a mixture of guilt and cynicism. It's a familiar enough combination. I think he feels he must pay some kind of price for what he did. What do you think?'

'Think?' I was very tired. 'I'm pretty much beyond rational thought myself! I'm beginning to suspect you of engineering this whole affair - especially the meeting with Dempsey. How is it possible? He carries the identical burden to the one I

carry. Under what circumstances could he have dropped a nuclear fission bomb on Hiroshima?'

'Similar circumstances to your own. He's a socialist. He became idealistically involved with Chinese nationalists trying to get foreigners out of their country. At that time Professor Marek was also working for the Chinese socialists. They were the only people desperate enough to believe that he could develop such a bomb. Other countries are working on the idea, of course, including the refining of uranium.

That's what was going on at Yekaterinaslav. Like you, they had no idea of the power of the crude bomb they made. They intended only to drop it on the airship yards—'

This is too much!' I held my head in my hands. 'It *is* madness! It isn't possible!'

'They dropped it and destroyed the entire city. Dempsey's vessel was his own, with a London registration. It was all the Japanese needed. If there had not been a delay in the detonation, of course, nothing of the ship would have survived. As it was they found the wreckage. Dempsey had been picked up before that. Most of the crew was dead. But the Japanese took a couple of prisoners. It was their excuse. Everyone was preparing for War, anyway. The Japanese decided that the British Government had committed an act of War . . .'

'And so struck first. It explains everything, including their ferocity.'

'Exactly.'

'Millions of people killed!' I groaned. 'Both Dempsey and I have that on our conscience. No wonder the poor man is the way he is!'

'You were both catalysts - no more than that. Do you still not realize what you are seeing? No individual can claim so much personal guilt. We are *all* guilty of supporting the circumstances, the self-deceptions, and the misconceptions, which lead to War. Every lie we tell ourselves makes something like the destruction of Hiroshima all the more

likely. More than one man has destroyed Hiroshima in more than one world, over and over again. The circumstances are often different, but the people die just the same, and some men (or women) feel that they carry the whole weight of responsibility. We are all victims, Mr. Bastable, just as, in other ways, we are all aggressors. At root we are victims of the comforting lies we tell ourselves, of our willingness to have leaders, religions, of our wish to shift responsibility onto others, whether it be politicians, Gods or creatures from other planets.'

'You sound like Makhno,' I said.

'I have much in common with Nestor Makhno.'

'You're an anarchist?'

'I don't believe in governments or religions, if that's what you mean.'

Somehow Mrs. Persson's revelations had relieved me. I had clarity, when I had up to now been confused. I no longer felt a victim of Fate, though in a sense, of course, I regained one - as much a victim, if not more of one, as Captain Dempsey.

'We should get some sleep,' said Mrs. Persson. 'We have to, witness Birchington's display tomorrow.'

'Why are you going along with all this?' I asked her.

She put a finger to her lips. 'Trust me,' she said.

'I do.' I was smiling. 'But I want no more innocent blood on my hands.'

She finished her coffee. 'Captain Bastable, if all goes well, we should have completed our task here by tomorrow, then you and I shall leave.'

'Leave? Where?'

'To a base. You are being invited to join the League of Temporal Adventurers.'

'Mrs. Persson, I am trying to get home. Back to my own time, my own world.'

'Captain Bastable, you must reconcile yourself to the fact that you will never know that particular form of security



again. Once you have experienced what you have experienced, your own time will simply not allow you to remain. But be assured that the League offers some sort of substitute. You will be somewhat more in control of your own fate than hitherto.'

'That would also mean a great deal to me,' I said.

'In the meanwhile,' she told me, 'please continue to follow my lead. This is a very complicated business indeed, Captain Bastable. A circle must be completed. A job must be done.'

In the morning we assembled outside the school, in a large quadrangle at the back. Cossacks were coming and going everywhere. The entire camp was busy with the noise of horses and soldiers, guns and armored vehicles. In the distance, an armored train went by, loaded with men and armaments. Everyone knew that Yekaterinaslav had been recaptured, that the Japanese were suing for peace and that Central Government troops were on their way to the Cossack headquarters.

Djugashvili reassured his *atamans*. 'This attack will be easily resisted. And very shortly now Moscow will be at our mercy.'

One *ataman*, splendid in black and silver, tugged at his huge, gray beard and grumbled. 'The airships will destroy us. They are cowards. We can't get at them. Cossack courage is useless against them.'

'We shall use our own science - a far better science - to deal with the threat of airships,' Djugashvili reassured him. The steel mask glinted as he raised his eyes towards the sun. 'You will see. Within a week we shall be riding through the streets of Petersburg. If Petersburg still exists.'

*The ataman* became nervous. 'By *God, hetman*, I hope you use no Devil's magic. I am a good Christian . . .'

'We fight for God and Socialism,' said Djugashvili, changing his tack. 'And for the Freedom of the Cossack Host. God had put an instrument into our hands which will ensure

that freedom for all time and which will enable us, as socialists, to do His work.'

Again I was forced to make sure that my incredulity did not appear on my features. I had to avoid Mrs. Persson's sardonic eye.

'For God and Socialism,' she said, 'we will destroy all who stand against us.'

The Cossack was mollified and went back to get his pony. He rode away to join his men.

Mrs. Persson murmured to me in English: 'it is in the nature of any good despot that he will say to those he needs anything they wish to hear. Only when he does not need them does he say what he really thinks. And sometimes, even then, he doesn't bother. The secret of becoming a great tyrant lies in an early ability to be all things to all men.'

'You sound as if you'd trained him yourself,' I said.

She made no reply to this.

Djugashvili had heard her speaking and turned his intense stare on her. 'Where is Dempsey?' he asked. 'Is he fit to take command of the ship?'

'Of course.'

I had seen Dempsey that morning. I was pretty certain that he was sustaining himself on drugs. He had, however, been absolutely determined to captain the *Vassarion Belinsky*. He had asked us to go ahead of him, saying he would join us shortly.

Djugashvili turned his back on us, rubbing at his steel helmet as if it were a real face. I wondered if he had slept in it. 'He had better be in control of himself,' he said threateningly. 'Ah, Mr. Birchington.'

Birchington had appeared, walking ahead of several Cossacks who were carrying something on their shoulders. It was wrapped in a mixture of canvas and sacking and was about twice as long as a tall man.

Birchington seemed ill at ease. 'Good morning, Chief. I hope—'

'So do I, Mr. Birchington. Is it ready?'

'Oh, there are no major problems—'

'Good. This will do our morale a lot of good. Have you heard the news? Enemy scouts have already been sighted in the air to the South and West.'

'But—'

'Believe me, Mr. Birchington. I know what impresses Cossacks.'

Birchington ordered the men to lower the thing to the ground. They planted it upright. It looked like a huge corpse, swathed in unsanitary winding clothes.

'Let Captain Bastable and Mrs. Persson see it. I can tell they're curious.' Djugashvili's joviality was sinister.

Birchington began to tug at the canvas and sacking. The thing was made of metal, which was obvious. As he stripped away the coverings we saw that it was a gigantic figure of a man in Cossack costume, cast in steel.

'There is a Steel Tsar to strike terror into the hearts of our enemies!' cried Djugashvili. 'What do you think?'

Neither Mrs. Persson nor I spoke.

The face was the identical face to the one on Djugashvili's own mask. Birchington had produced a model of the Cossack *hetman* more than double life-size. The whole scene seemed increasingly bizarre to me.

'What do you think?'

'It's splendid,' said Mrs. Persson.

I nodded enthusiastically. It was the best I could muster.

'We'll show him to our troops in a moment,' said Djugashvili. 'He will lead them into battle. And while our Cossacks fight the Central Government, you will fly the ship to Makhno's camp and drop the first bomb.'

Birchington seemed unusually silent and not nearly as full of himself as usual. He ordered the men to pick up the metal statue and carry it towards the main Cossack camp.

Djugashvili was elated. 'Come along,' he said to us.

Dempsey arrived. He had had a shave and was wearing an airshipman's uniform. The clothes seemed far too big for him. He was haggard, but he walked steadily and seemed to have lost the attitude of despair I had begun to identify with him. He even winked at me. 'Morning, Bastable. Ready for going aloft?'

'We're all ready,' said Mrs. Persson.

Professor Marek now joined the party, as we walked along behind 'the Chief. Marek was shaking his head. 'Too soon,' he mumbled. 'Far too soon.'

None of us had any idea what he meant. He seemed half-mad and still very ill. We ignored him.

We reached the outskirts of the town. The Cossack Host was assembling, rank upon rank of horsemen, stretching almost as far as the eye could see. Armored vehicles and field guns were also drawn up. A platform had been erected in front of them and beside that a dais. Djughashvili mounted the dais and saluted his troops.

Birchington supervised the men as they pushed the heavy metal figure to its feet.

'Free Cossacks!' cried Djughashvili. 'Your blood has been spilled in the holy cause of liberty and socialism. The Central Government has sent its might against us and all the power of its science has been brought to bear on us. Yet we are not defeated. Now we have our own science - our own miracles. Behold!' He made a grandiose gesture with his arm in the direction of the metal man. 'Here is a Tsar made truly of steel. An impregnable battle-leader worthy of the Free Cossacks.' He murmured to Birchington. 'Set him in motion.'

Birchington reached up to the figure's waist and depressed a lever. Suddenly the steel creature came to life. With awkward, spastic movements it reached to its belt and began to draw the huge saber, which had evidently been designed as a match for the mechanical man's size. With a screech the saber cleared its scabbard.

The Cossacks were impressed. Djugashvili evidently knew them well. As the mechanical man raised the saber over its head, the Cossacks began to cheer. They drew their own swords and waved them; they made their horses rear. The noise of their approval was deafening.

Slowly, the mechanical monster turned its head, as if listening. It inclined its gaze to stare down on Birchington. It lifted its head. Evidently Birchington had previously designed all these movements. It walked forward a few paces, towards the huge gathering of horsemen. It stopped, the saber still raised. Again they cheered.

Mrs. Persson put her lips close to my ear. 'They love icons. They would rather have statues than real people. It has been their undoing over the centuries.'

Dempsey had begun to laugh and only grew silent when Mrs. Persson signed to him to stop. I, for my part, found the whole scene nightmarish.

The mechanical Steel Tsar began to wave its saber over its head, as if in imitation of the Cossacks. It moved forward again.

Then one knee bent. I think Birchington had meant this series of movements to show the mechanical creature's supplication to its master, Djugashvili. But the motion was halted. The knee jerked a couple of times. There was a squeak and a clash of metal. It began to turn, but the leg dragged. It swayed.

Djugashvili maintained his posture but he was angry. 'Set the thing to rights, Birchington, or you're finished.'

Birchington ran towards his mechanical man, reaching up for the lever at the waist.

The thing seemed to sense him and completed its turn. Swiftly the sword-arm began to descend.

Birchington shouted: 'Oh, no. This isn't supposed to happen!' Then the saber had sliced him from crown to breastbone. Blood flew everywhere.

Suddenly the Cossacks were silent.

Birchington's body fell to the black earth. With a grinding of cogs and wheels, the mechanical man began to topple. It crashed onto its creator's corpse.

I heard Professor Marek behind me. 'I said it was too soon. He didn't give himself enough time . . .'

I could hear the wind, sighing over the steppe.

And then came the dry, dreadful sound of Djugashvili's laughter.

'Well, well, Mr. Birchington. How neat.' He addressed the bewildered Cossack Host. 'The traitor Birchington is the first to die beneath the vengeful sword of the Steel Tsar! This spy for the Central Government was trying to sabotage our War Effort. We are revenged, brothers! Freedom!'

'Poor Birchington,' said Mrs. Persson. 'What a dreadful lesson.'

'What a final one,' said Dempsey. He moved away.

Djugashvili spoke to us. 'Professor Marek. Revive the mechanical man, if you can. Get it back to the laboratories.' 'Too soon,' said Marek. He signed to the soldiers to lift the creature onto their shoulders once again.

'Captain Dempsey. Are the bombs aboard?'

'They're aboard,' said Dempsey.

'Then get to your first target. Be quick, Captain Dempsey. I want to witness no more disloyalty.'

I looked up at the sky. I pointed. 'You had better concern yourself with immediate problems,' I said.

There were troop-ships on their way. Even as we stared, the first gliding infantry began to leave the craft and drift towards us, firing as they came.

## **8.**

### ***A Kind of Revolution***

Professor Marek hurried aboard just as we were about to go aloft. On the familiar control deck of the *Vassarion Belinsky* I stood between Captain Dempsey and Mrs. Persson, staring through the observation ports as the ship rose swiftly into the air. We had a ramshackle crew of half-trained Cossacks, some of whom were deserters from the Volunteer Air fleet. As Dempsey had said to me: 'They're good enough for this work, Bastable, never fear.'

Through the ports we could witness the first battles between Cossacks and Central Government troops. The expert riflemen of the steppe were picking off the gliding infantry even as they left their ships. They fell like stricken butterflies.

'We'd better let them get on with it,' said 'Dempsey carelessly. 'All right, height coxswain - put us up to five thousand feet: moderate ascent. Helmsman - North-by-North West, if you please. Half-speed, Mr. Bastable.'

All at once he had become a capable airship commander - everything he had been before he had helped in an appalling crime of mass-murder, in the name of an idealistic principle. But, why had he agreed to bomb Makhno's camp? Had cynicism, like a cancer, corroded him completely?

Dempsey's hands were hardly shaking at all as he stood on the bridge, his arms folded across his chest, watching the ground fall away. Our ship still flew Russian colors, so we were not attacked. Indeed, Dempsey made the wireless operator send a message offering to join the battle. We were told to return to Odessa for fresh armaments and to report on our condition.

The last thing I saw were the first aerial torpedoes buzzing down upon the Cossack riders. I turned away from the observation ports.

'Dempsey,' I said. 'Are you really going to drop another of those hell-bombs. Are you going to kill Makhno and all his people?'

Dempsey turned his sad, self-mocking eyes on me. 'Of course—'

'But—'

'Of course he is,' said a voice behind me.

It was Djugashvili, flanked by a couple of well-armed Cossacks. He had not trusted any of us.

The Steel Tsar laughed within his mask. 'I want to see Makhno's end for myself.'

'But your men,' I said. 'They are leaderless! It seems that the entire Volunteer Fleet is going against them.'

'They have Birchington's giant. It's down there somewhere, giving them strength, giving them hope.'

'It's a useless icon!'

'They need nothing else. Besides, Captain Bastable, those chaps have pretty much served their turn. They are an anachronism - their attitudes hamper the course of Scientific Socialism.'

I could feel the blood drain from my features. 'You are sacrificing those men. They trusted you absolutely. You gave them the rhetoric and the goals to make them fight. They will not surrender. They could all be killed. For what?'

'For History,' he said. He seemed impatient with me, as if I was asking childish naive questions. 'For the Future.'

Mrs. Persson interrupted us. 'The idea of the Future,' she said, 'will gradually come to replace the idea of God. The two conceptions, however, will be all but identical in the manner in which they are self-contradictory and therefore confusing to their worshippers. By remaining confused, and therefore weakened, their priests more easily manipulate the worshippers, or whatever those priests call themselves.'



Since the priests are often as confused as those they pretend to lead, they will become angry if their rationales are in any way questioned. They will kill the questioners. In the meantime—'

She was speaking rapidly in English. Djugashvili strode up to the bridge and stood beside Dempsey, raising his withered arm to silence her. 'You'll be our first admiral, Captain Dempsey. You will be a Hero of Socialism. Never fear. There are hundreds, thousands of disaffected people in Moscow and Petersburg alone. They'll rise up to join us, after our demonstration of what Scientific Socialism can achieve.'

Dempsey leaned forward, checking various instruments. 'Three-quarter speed, Mr. Bastable.'

'Three-quarter speed.' I conveyed the order to the engineers.

'You will lead our airships to Petersburg,' Djugashvili continued. 'You are a brave, fine man, Captain Dempsey. You will be rewarded with every honor . . .'

We all knew that this was his method of cajoling what he needed from people. We all knew that as soon as Dempsey had served his turn, he, too, could be 'liquidated' in the name of the Future.

'Thank you, sir,' said Dempsey. He looked towards Professor Marek, who sat jotting down calculations on a pad of paper.

Djugashvili clapped Dempsey on the back. 'I know how to show my gratitude, captain.'

'Oh, indeed, sir.' Dempsey gave a further instruction to the helmsman.

The skies were gray today, and vast. A little rain began to spot the observation ports. We heard it drumming on our hull. Grey light filled the bridge, increasing Dempsey's pallor and emphasizing the unhealthy, peeling skin of Professor Marek. The ship seemed like a ship of the dead already, to me.

Dempsey detected a change in the forward starboard engine. He cocked his head to one side. Like any good airship captain he was listening all the time. An airship's running depends as much on the ears as on the eyes. 'Something wrong, Mr. Bastable. Could you go and check the nacelle?'

'Very good.'

I left the control cabin and, to my surprise, found that Mrs. Persson had followed me.

'How much further to Makhno's camp?' I asked her, as we walked along the companionway. There was cloud all around us now.

'About half-an-hour. We have to disarm those bombs, Captain Bastable.'

'What?'

'It's the whole point of this. We disarm them, they're dropped, and they prove useless. It is why we've been going along with Djughashvili up to now. However, we hadn't expected him to join us aboard the ship.'

I was enlightened. 'I know very little about bombs,' I said, 'especially this kind.'

'I know a great deal about them. Come. We'll go to the bomb bay this way. It isn't guarded.' She opened a hatch door and let me into semi-darkness. We descended a steel ladder. I could hear the familiar creaking of the bomb-racks and at last saw four crudely-made cases of roughly standard size, lettered in Old Slavic and decorated with peculiar designs of the kind I had seen on Cossack weapons. Were these the bombs, which could threaten the destruction of the entire world?

Mrs. Persson said: 'the detonating devices are in the noses. We have to unscrew them.' With her legs straddling the bomb-flaps, she reached for a large wrench. 'Use this,' she said.

Below I could see a little daylight from time to time, as the flaps gave slightly. I had the feeling that we could as easily

fall through the flaps as the bombs and began to tread very carefully as I strove to remove the nose of the first bomb.

We had not been working more than five minutes before we heard voices from the gallery above us. 'There's no need for that.' It was Dempsey, sounding like the Wrath of God. 'There's no need for that, at all. Leave my bombs alone.'

'Dempsey!' Una Persson became agitated. 'Are you really crazy? This was what we agreed we should do—'

'It was your plan, Mrs. Persson. Not mine.'

'You surely aren't going to help Djugashvili!'

Dempsey was pointing a large revolver at us. 'Move away,' he said.

'Dempsey!' I had never seen Mrs. Persson so obviously frightened. 'You can't. Makhno—'

'Those bombs must be detonated,' said Dempsey. 'Nothing else will do.'

'But we intend to prove they can't work . . .'

'It will prove nothing!'

Mrs. Persson continued to persevere with the nose of the bomb. Dempsey ordered his men towards us.

Mrs. Persson seemed almost to be crying as she struggled. I must admit that I gave up. Quietly, I handed my wrench to the first Cossack to approach me. He put a pack into my hands, as if in exchange. I did not know what it was.

The bomb bays were full of Cossacks now, completely surrounding us.

'You're interfering with my plan,' said Dempsey coldly. 'And I have the right, not you, to decide what to do with these.'

'You have no right. No more than anyone. You assume too much guilt, Captain Dempsey.' Mrs. Persson struggled as the Cossacks held her, forcing her to drop the spanner.

'And you assume too much responsibility,' he said. 'I have the right.'

'And what about you, Captain Bastable?' she said. 'Haven't you an equal right?'

'Not here,' I said. I looked up at Dempsey. I didn't know what he planned to do, but I now respected his judgment completely. 'And I agree with Captain Dempsey, Mrs. Persson. He has the right, together with Professor Marek.'

Dempsey bowed slightly. My words seemed to cheer him. He raised an eyebrow. 'Mrs. Persson?'

She shrugged. 'Very well. Captain Dempsey. But if you kill Makhno...'

'That will be my responsibility, I think.'

'And mine, if I haven't attempted to stop you.'

I interrupted. 'Is this the moment for moral discussions?' I asked.

'Those packs contain gliding apparatus,' said Dempsey. He rubbed at his sunken eyes. His voice became suddenly weary. 'You'll use them to escape.'

'Where is the Steel Tsar?' asked Mrs. Persson. 'He has the real power on this ship . . .'

'Not any longer,' said Dempsey.

'Where is he?'

'Safe.' Dempsey turned away. 'I'll say goodbye to you both. It's unlikely we'll ever meet again.'

'Goodbye, Dempsey,' I said. And I added: 'And good luck.'

He was laughing as he climbed back up the steel ladder, towards his control deck. 'Thank you, Bastable. Thank you very much.'

The gliding apparatus was strapped onto us and we were pushed roughly through the bomb-flaps. Seconds later the wings opened out and we were drifting slowly down towards the barren steppe. There was no sign of human life anywhere below us. We looked back.

The airship was making good speed away from us, heading north East.

We landed rather bumpily on coarse turf. I hurt my ankle slightly, but had no serious injury.

As I was helping Mrs. Persson remove her apparatus I was suddenly bathed in brilliant light, as if the sun had emerged, unexpectedly, from behind the clouds. Mrs. Persson flung herself down and I followed suit, without quite understanding why.

Moments later the ground began to shake as a huge, echoing boom began to sound throughout the world.

We both recognized it for what it was, of course. Dempsey had exploded the bombs in the air over the steppe. We saw a massive column of smoke, just as ash began to fall like rain across the landscape.

Mrs. Persson said: The fool. I knew he'd try it. I thought I'd convinced him. But he outguessed me, after all. His guilt was too great. But it was completely unnecessary.'

'I understand why he wanted to do it this way,' I said.

She was impatient. 'Understand? So do I. But what's that got to do with it? This is another loss.'

I still do not know what she meant. She was crying.

I made some attempt to comfort her, but Una Persson is not an easy woman to comfort. She recovered herself as she began to walk stolidly across the steppe, her back to the bomb cloud. The wind blew against our faces. She said: 'the bomb, its inventor, the despot prepared to use it and the despot's servants are all gone now. But while that syndrome continues to exist so will that particular circle continue. I'd hoped to break it. To make a different circle.'

'Can that circle ever be broken?' I asked her.

'It's what I'm trying to find out,' she said.

A day and a half later we were discovered by some of Nestor Makhno's horsemen. We were weary and depressed, and the news that Makhno had gained concessions from the Central Government, of territory in which to conduct his 'anarchist experiment' only slightly cheered us.

That evening, during an open-air celebration, beneath the masts of Makhno's black cruisers, I became quite drunk and asked Mrs. Persson: 'Did Dempsey really die for nothing?'

'I suppose not. But what good is a martyr, Captain Bastable? While people believe in the magic power of personalities, rather than the human fallibility of individuals, they will never be free.'

'But Dempsey wished only to make amends. He said it was his right: and it *was* his right.'

Nestor Makhno leaned forward. He was even drunker, I think, than me. 'We are all guilty. We are all innocent. Only when we accept responsibility for our own actions are we free - and only then will the world be safe for us all. Dempsey had an old-fashioned sense of honor. He destroyed himself because of it. He saved many lives, it is true, but Mrs. Persson's plan might have saved more. While we compete with ourselves in that way, while we compete with each other, blame one another for our misfortunes, there will always be the chance of conflicts such as the one which is now over.'

Makhno's words meant something to me. But then so had Dempsey's actions. At last I was relieved of that terrible lack of faith in myself, of that awful bewilderment and, as Mrs. Persson told me later, was ready to become a conscious traveler between the worlds, to join that strange body of people known as the League of Temporal Adventurers. I felt that what had begun in the Temple of Teku Benga was now finished. A new phase in my life was beginning - perhaps a more positive phase.

Time, as they say, will tell, Moorcock. I have learned only one thing in all my adventures: that despots are all pretty much the same, but there are many different kinds of victims.

I hope this manuscript reaches you and that you will be able to publish it. I have a feeling it is the last you will ever receive from me. The time for reviewing my past is over.

Now I look forward, if that's the appropriate word, to life in the eternal present.

**Captain *Oswald Bastable*,  
Airshipman,  
Somewhere in the Lower Devonian.**

## **Editor's Afterword**

And that, as best I can present it, is the final story of Oswald Bastable. As many readers will already know 'The Steel Tsar' Djugashvili sounds remarkably like 'the Man of Steel', that well-known ex-priest, the Georgian who chose for himself the name of Josef 'Stalin'. But then it is not uncommon, in all the worlds of the multiverse, for the same kind of personalities to emerge in roughly similar roles. What is usually more interesting is when, through altered circumstances, they appear in very different roles. Although I expect further visits from Mrs. Persson, I gather that there will be no more special news of Bastable now that he has joined the famous League. I am glad, however, to learn that he has found himself at last, found some sort of direction, and is reconciled both to his 'crime' and his loss of home.

*Michael Moorcock*  
Yorkshire, June 1980